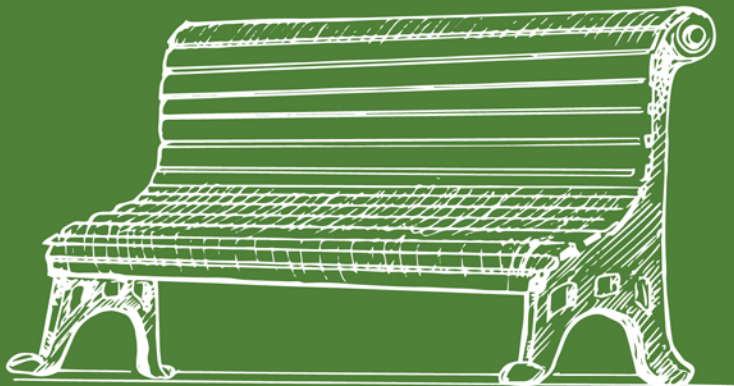


Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator

Edited by David A. Crespy
and Lincoln Konkle



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Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator

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New Perspectives in Edward Albee's Studies is published in collaboration with the Edward Albee Society.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Crespy, David Allison, editor. | Konkle, Lincoln, editor.

Title: Edward Albee as theatrical and dramatic innovator / edited by David A.

Crespy, Lincoln Konkle.

Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill Rodopi, 2019. | Series: Ne perspectives in Edward Albee studies ; volume 3 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019017293 | ISBN 9789004394704 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Albee, Edward, 1928-2016--Criticism and interpretation.

Classification: LCC PS3551.L25 Z6645 2019 | DDC 812/.54--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019017293>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 2451-9553

ISBN 978-90-04-39470-4 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-39471-1 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

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Editors' Introduction

David A. Crespy and Lincoln Konkle

1 Edward Albee as Dramatic Innovator

Thinking of the major American playwrights of the twentieth century—Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, August Wilson—each forms a gestalt based upon their most famous plays. Rather than remembering O'Neill's experiments with style and subject matter from the twenties and thirties, we think of *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*—all realistic and autobiographical. Williams is most lauded for *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*—the finest examples of his poetic realism. Miller has his famous four plays depicting individuals who are destroyed by society's values: *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*. August Wilson wrote a play about the African-American experience for each decade of the century, the best known of which are *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. The point is that the cited examples of each playwright are of a piece. Their dramatic and theatrical similarities, along with subject matter and theme, make them easily identifiable as a play by the particular playwright.

However, if one tried to think of a gestalt for Edward Albee, it would probably have to be based only on his masterpiece: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Thinking of his other famous and award-winning plays, they are not of a piece, either theatrically or dramatically. To illustrate:

A young man who lives in a run-down New York tenement virtually hypnotizes an upper-middle class family man reading on a bench in Central Park. After the young man fascinates the other about his attempt to befriend a dog, his conversation with the older man leads to a suicide but also an authentic connection between two strangers. (*The Zoo Story*).

An old woman is buried in a children's sandbox on a beach. Her family, a wealthy couple who have paid to do things right, listen to a cellist playing as the moment of death approaches though all the while the old woman has been complaining to the audience. After the couple departs, a young man doing calisthenics becomes the Angel of Death, silencing the old woman. (*The Sandbox*).

A middle-aged couple returns home from a faculty party at a New England college and proceeds to throw a drunken impromptu party for a young couple new to the college. Rather than polite party games, they play vicious highly

personal games perhaps with life-changing consequences for all of them. (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*).

A retired couple debates what to do with the rest of their lives as they picnic on a beach. By the end of the first act a pair of human-sized lizards approach them. In Act Two the lizards, who can talk, compare life under the sea to life on land, decide to return to their home, but the retired couple persuades them to stay. (*Seascape*).

An elderly widow in poor health is attended to by her middle-aged, hired caretaker and a young lawyer from the firm that manages her wealth. Between cries of pain from an injury from her most recent fall and rushed trips to the bathroom, the woman shares memories of her ninety years of life. At the end of the act, she suffers a stroke. Act Two presents the same three actresses but now playing the elderly woman at three stages of her life: her twenties, fifties, and nineties. The end of the play suggests the end of her life, perhaps with an integration of her younger selves. (*Three Tall Women*).

A highly successful Manhattan architect reveals to his best friend that he has been having an affair with a goat. The friend's revelation of this secret to the architect's wife causes a terrible fight among the couple and their gay son, and the play ends with the revelation of an act of revenge: the wife drags the slain goat into their living room. (*The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*).

These short and full-length plays are too varied in character, situation, or theatrical style to easily form a type that might be called "the Albee play."

One might counter that a full listing of his plays would show Albee's commonalities (e.g., upper-class middle-aged couples) as with any of the other playwrights, but a comprehensive review of his plays would also show a range of other types of characters. Think of *Tiny Alice*: a Cardinal of the Church, a lay-priest, a wealthy woman, a lawyer, and a butler (it sounds like the start of a walk-into-a-bar joke). Or *Box* and *Quotations from Chair Mao Tse-ung*: a disembodied voice, the former head of the Chinese Communist party, a long-winded lady, a silent minister, and an old woman. *Listening* has no married couples, just a psychiatrist, her former lover, and her female patient. *The Play About The Baby* brings together a young couple who have just had their first child and an older man and woman though they do not seem to be a couple. In *Fragments*, characters are identified only by gender and age and none of them is a couple.

And think of the variation of theatrical style in the famous plays summarized above: from a minimalist realism (*The Zoo Story*), to fourth-wall breaking metatheatricality (*The Sandbox*), to nearly kitchen sink-realism in a living room (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), to fairy tale symbolism (*Seascape*), to the expressionistic splitting of a character into three selves (*Three Tall Women*),

and finally to a more subtle metatheatres that recalls the ritualistic origins of western theatre itself (*The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*).

All of this variety in dramatic subject and theatrical style is our first evidence for labeling Edward Albee as an innovator: he innovates from play to play. As Albee himself said, the critics would have preferred him to have made a career of writing "*Son of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" In other words, they wanted his plays to be more of a piece. But there are many other ways in which Albee was a theatrical and dramatic innovator.

One of the most obvious innovations in his plays is the incorporation of blatant unconventional theatricality or drama, or otherness, or unreality in some plays that are mostly realistic in style: the Angel of Death from *The Sandbox* more realistically reprised as the characters Elizabeth and Oscar in *The Lady from Dubuque*, talking lizards in *Seascape*, a man who gives a lecture about having grown and lost a third arm in *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, an elderly woman split into three different ages enabling her to converse with her younger selves before she dies (*Three Tall Women*). Early in Albee's career, these breaks from reality were explained as part of the Theatre of the Absurd movement, whose heyday was the 1950s. Albee has admitted being influenced by Ionesco and Beckett in particular, but his plays do not merely transfer the absurdist playwrights' subject and style into American settings. Albee brings the real and the unreal into close proximity, making them even more disturbing than some absurdist plays' frank artificiality. At any rate, Albee remains one of the only American playwrights linked to a European dramatic style, and his inclusion in Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, at least in the 1968 edition (Albee wasn't included in the first edition), is perhaps his most well-known innovation. Whether or not Albee should be included there or if in fact the Theatre of the Absurd is a useful descriptor for his plays was the subject for our first volume of *New Perspectives in Edward Albee Studies*.¹

Many elements in Albee's plays seem ordinary enough in the abstract (a story about befriending a dog, party games to entertain guests, discussing what a couple will do with their future once retired); however, they transcend the mundane, sometimes because of literary, cultural, or historical allusions in the dialogue or stage directions, but also because of their specific function within the plays. "The story of Jerry and the Dog" is a microcosm of *The Zoo Story*, a device that Albee would employ in other plays (e.g., Mommy's hat story in *The American Dream*, Tobias' cat story in *A Delicate Balance*, the game of twenty questions in *The Lady from Dubuque*). The party games George and Martha

1 Michael Y. Bennett, ed. *Edward Albee and Absurdism*, *New Perspectives in Edward Albee Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2017).

play with or on Nick and Honey—Humiliate the Host, Get the Guests, Hump the Hostess, Bringing Up Baby—are improvised, based upon the pasts of either couple, but also ritualistic and metatheatrical, analogous to the classic play-within-the-play but more integrated into the Aristotelian action of the play as a whole. In *Seascape*, Charlie and Nancy's disagreement about what they should do in their retirement is elevated above the ordinary once the appearance of the lizards forces the idea of evolution into the play; thus, in retrospect, a retired couple's future becomes an allegory of the future of humankind: Will we continue to aspire, to make progress, or be satisfied with a comfortable stagnation?

Key to Albee's innovative style was his ability to confront his audiences in a manner that would leave them unsettled or unnerved. In fact, in some of his plays, most recently *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, audience members were so uncomfortable and disturbed by the actions depicted in the play that they walked out. (This was one of the aspects of performing Albee's plays that actor Bill Pullman mentioned in his testimonial at Albee's memorial service in 2016.) One technique Albee employed in some of his plays to confront audiences with hard truths was to have characters break the fourth wall. Although he wasn't the first to break the fourth wall, Albee's use of direct address, shattering the barrier between character and audience, did not have the friendly, reflective quality of, say, the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Instead, those moments—whether conspiratorial (Grandma in *The American Dream*), openly entertaining and vaudevillian (the man and woman in *The Play about the Baby*), or desperate (Jo's asides in *The Lady from Dubuque*)—were intended to force the audience to move from spectator to what Augusto Boal might call the "spect-actor" and to actually change their behavior to live their lives consciously and actively rather than to sleepwalk through life.²

Another distinction of Albee's work (at least within the hegemony of dramatic realism) stems from the fact that he is the most intellectual of American playwrights up to Kushner. Of course O'Neill, Odets, Wilder, Williams, and Miller were intellectual in their own way. However, it is the emotional response evoked in the audience (which Bertolt Brecht was so critical of) that dominates their plays. Albee's plays also provide a range of emotional responses, but the characters he creates and the stories he tells are attempts to get the audience not only to question what they take as the norm (e.g., American society as it has developed, as opposed to the ideals stated in our founding documents and later great expressions of those ideals; the use and misuse of language as

2 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993).

our means of communication; the acceptance of illusion as reality), but also to think of the way things should be. In Aristotelian terms, Albee gives lower priority to catharsis than to anagnorisis (i.e., as an epiphany; the movement from ignorance to knowledge, but knowledge of a philosophical nature whether on the personal, societal, or cosmic levels).

This intellectual emphasis has produced some of the truly great monologues in American drama. Some of these are profoundly serious, others comic, and some both. For example, Jerry's speech about making contact if not with God or people then with a dog; George's speech about genetic engineering and totalitarian-enforced conformity; Agnes' speech about traditional gender roles within marriage and Tobias' plea to Harry to stay with them; Voice and the Long-Winded Lady's monologues about entropy in civilization and individual lives; Elizabeth's speech about identity and the end of the world; A, B, C's speeches on the best time in life; Martin's speech about sexual stimulation—and so many more. These intellectual arias, not so unlike the famous soliloquies in Shakespeare, are part of what make Albee's plays great dramatic literature, not just scripts for performance. Reading his plays, which allows one to stop and reflect deeply on the implications of the monologues and other points in dialogue, is a truly rewarding literary experience, which cannot always be said of twenty-first century plays that are recognized with Pulitzer Prizes, Tony Awards, and other awards.

Another way in which Albee was surprisingly innovative in his early career was in his adaptations of novels and even one play. Apart from Thornton Wilder,³ no other American playwright practiced adaptation in the full glare of Broadway as much as Albee did in four plays: *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1963—from Carson McCullers' novella), *Malcolm* (1966—from James Purdy's novel), *Everything in the Garden* (1967—from Giles Cooper's play), and *Lolita* (1981—from Vladimir Nabokov's novel).⁴ Overall, these productions were not successful commercially or well received by critics, but Albee never let either of those factors interfere with his ongoing project of innovating theatrical art or of bringing unconventional stories before theatre audiences. And for Albee,

3 Besides Wilder's adaptation of a play by Johann Nestroy as *The Matchmaker* (1955), which was itself adapted as the phenomenally successful musical *Hello Dolly!* (1964), he translated Andre Obey's *Le Viol de Lucrece* as *Lucrece* for Katharine Cornell and created an American acting version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by revising William Archer's standard English translation for Ruth Gordon. Both appeared on Broadway before *Our Town*.

4 In addition, in 1961 Albee wrote the libretto for William Flanagan's opera version of *Bartleby the Scrivener*, by Herman Melville. In 1966, Albee was brought in to revise the book of a musical adaptation of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, by Truman Capote, which played four previews and was shut down before opening.

each adaptation was driven not by some commercial need but rather by his personal celebration of challenging authors he felt deserved greater exposure under the bright lights of Broadway and his desire to collaborate deeply with their unusual talents and unique truths they brought to American culture. Each adaptation contributed to Albee's radical desire to push theatre and art in new and often controversial directions.⁵

Even after his death, Albee is proving to be controversial, which may be a reflection of his innovativeness or his contrariness, depending on one's point of view. In his will, Albee demanded that all of his unfinished work be destroyed.⁶ For Albee scholars, this was devastating news, especially if it included plays that had at least one performance somewhere but never in New York and that were never published (e.g., *Walking, Envy, The Lorca Play*) or the play on which he was at work at the time of his death, *Laying an Egg*. If one thinks of the treasure trove of Tennessee Williams plays, both full-length and shorter, that was finally made available for performance and publication beginning in the late 1990s, it is disappointing that Albee scholars will not have the chance at least to read his unfinished plays. Undoubtedly, as with Williams, there would be kernels of greatness even if the plays overall were not up to Albee's high standards. Thus, in making the decision to have his unfinished work destroyed (as opposed to intentionally making it available by donating it to an archival institution or letting his estate decide what to do with it), Albee proved himself innovative as a writer, even if we Albee scholars wish he had not been so.

Even more controversial since his death is Albee's representatives' refusal to allow a black actor to be cast in the role of Nick in a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at a small theatre in Oregon in 2017.⁷ This was merely an extension of Albee's own practice during his life: for every major production of his plays in New York or London or regional theatre, he insisted on cast approval. For example, he would not allow two male actors to play Martha and Honey to suggest that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* dramatizes two gay couples because he wrote the play in a realistic style about two straight couples. Though Albee had permitted race-blind casting of his productions in some cases, he had also apparently disallowed such requests when, again, to do so

5 For an excellent discussion of Albee's adaptations, see Stephen Bottoms' "Albee's Monster Children: Adaptations and Confrontations," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127–147.

6 Michael Paulson, "A Last Wish from Albee: Destroy Work Left Undone," *New York Times* (New York Edition), July 5, 2017, C1.

7 See Diep Tran, "When a Writer's Rights Aren't Right: The 'Virginia Woolf' Casting Fight," *American Theatre*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/05/22/when-a-writers-rights-arent-right-the-virginia-woolf-casting-fight/>.

would undercut the realism of the play. This was by no means because Albee was racist. Early in his career part of the control he exercised over his plays was that they could not be performed in segregated theatres, and it was stated so in the acting editions of his plays. He also addressed racism in two of his plays: *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The Lady from Dubuque*. And for nonrealistic plays such as *The Sandbox*, as director of a 2008 production at the Cherry Lane Theatre, Albee cast an African American to play the Young Man who becomes the Angel of Death. The race of the Young Man had no bearing on the ideas and emotions of the play.

Had Albee's representatives allowed Nick to be played by an African American, it would have changed the play substantially and required much more revision of the text than the director claimed ("bald" for "blond"). For example, both George and Martha refer to Nick as "boy" and they insist that if he hasn't "made it in the sack" with Martha then he is a "houseboy." If Nick is black, these lines take on racist overtones. To make George and Martha racists would radically change what *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is about according to Albee's stated intention, drama critics' reviews, and extensive scholarly analysis. An African-American Nick would also play into several aspects of racist stereotypes, since Nick is not an admirable character. Perhaps an all-black cast of *Virginia Woolf* could avoid these pitfalls, but there would still need to be changes in the text, and that is another thing Albee maintained control of: Any revisions to what he had written and published were to be his or approved by him. Is this an innovation? We can at least say that many playwrights do not exercise the control over their work that Albee did in life or now in death through his representatives.

Within the realm of dramatic innovation, several of our essays in this volume attempt to get at what makes Albee *Albee*—that is, what was Albee's essence as a dramatist, and because of the protean nature of his dramaturgy, that becomes a challenging task, but there are certain qualities that these essays attempt to tease out and reflect upon. For David Marcia, in his essay, "Art Is a Hammer: Aura, Textual Awareness, and Comedy in Albee," Albee's "use of a naturalistic setting coupled with comedy and textual awareness that reduces audience empathy and engages critical faculties" was a technique that made Albee unique in distancing the audience and in making dialogue, characterization, and relationships "strange" in the manner of Victor Schlovsky's famous formalist essay on "Art as Technique." In addition, Marcia analyzes the influence of vaudeville in Albee's plays, noting that "comedy resists analysis; it is anarchic, transgressive, and draws the audience into the action of the play more out of a sense of being superior to the characters and their actions, rather than via empathy or sympathy."

Nathan Hedman's essay, "Albee Stages Secular Epiphany," is based on the theories of Charles Taylor, whose book, *A Secular Age*, inspired the notion of immanent frame, that is, the feeling that one is living in a secular moment. For Hedman, in *The Zoo Story*, *Tiny Alice*, *Seascape*, and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, Albee's characters experience these unique epiphanies not as religious in nature but in a way that reveals that deep sense of the secular. That is, what separates Albee's characters from those in other playwrights' plays is that when the truth is revealed to them in their moment of anagnorisis, it is not the gods or Fate who provides it but rather the fact of their own actual lives in the present, lived moment.

For other writers in this volume, it is Albee's choice of subject matter that proved his innovation in drama, and it is here that Milbre Burch celebrates not only Albee's commitment to writing fully realized, complex, and daunting female characters but also his deep exploration of death and dying that seems to be emblematic of the ancient mythic figure of Hecate, the Goddess of three aspects: maiden, mother, and crone. Burch, a Grammy-nominated storyteller, digs into this mythic substrata in her essay "Theatrical Thanatology: Direct Address, Gestural Storytelling, and the Triple Goddess in Three Plays about Dying by Edward Albee," looking at Albee's revelations of dying women in *The Sandbox*, *The Lady from Dubuque*, and *Three Tall Women* and finding an extraordinary embrace of thanatology long before it was considered to be a subject for dramatic writing.

In Ashley Raven's essay, "A Queer Reading of Love in Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," Albee's innovation was radically questioning the nature of love, sex, and marriage "as if, for the first time in a long time, or for the first time ever, the word 'love' has taken on an unfamiliar meaning, a meaning too indeterminate to verbalize." Raven looks at Albee's queering of love in *Counting the Ways* through the lens of vaudeville technique and hypereloquence, as well as demonstrating where this neglected and underestimated play complicates several traditional signifiers of love. Thus, "Albee shatters the illusions of the few in search of a more precisely defined truth for the many."

Finally, Parisa Shams explores the disruption of kinship in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* in her essay, "The Glee of Vulnerability: Becoming Kin with Edward Albee's *Goat*." Shams explores how *The Goat* unveils "the transgressive impulses and perplexing emotions that define and disrupt our most intimate bonds," thereby "breaking ties" with "human kin." Albee's dramatic innovation here is to create an "unsettling provocation of conventions of the tragic genre" that brings audiences face to face with "the transgressive impulses that define and disrupt our most intimate ties." Using the theories of Judith Butler, Shams

unmasks Albee's ability to engage in notions of vulnerability that trouble the nature of tolerance and violence in both human and animal relationships.

2 Edward Albee as Theatrical Innovator

While acknowledging Edward Albee's innovations as a playwright within the framework of dramatic technique, it was important to the editors of this volume to acknowledge Albee as an innovator in the realm of the theatrical: theatre as a physical art form, a place of seeing, a nexus of art, politics, social change, commerce, and identity in dialogue on stage with an audience experiencing theatre using nearly all five senses. As a mainstream playwright who is considered in the same league as O'Neill, Williams, and Miller, as noted above, Albee experimented wildly in the realm of the theatrical, moving from naturalism in one play to surrealism in another, and using techniques in plays such as *The American Dream*, *The Sandbox*, *Tiny Alice*, *Seascape*, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, *The Play About the Baby*, and *Me, Myself & I* that earned him the label of Absurdist—deserved or not.

Many of the essays in this volume consider Albee primarily from the viewpoint of spectacle. Valentine Vasak, in "Inside the Black Box: Albee's Visual Aesthetics of Obscurity," takes a profoundly minimalistic look at the nature of how Albee uses one of the fundamental geometrical shapes, the cube, which forms the backdrop of *Box*, from a purely theoretical standpoint, so that "it allows the audience to reassess the notion of obscurity." Vasak looks not only at Albee's use of the cube in his companion plays *Box* and *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* but also employs the philosophy of science that scholars such as Bruno Latour use to deepen the conversation about Albee's plays and how they can be read as artistic statements about the "inherent complexity of art."

Albee's innovations in theatre were significant not just as playwriting but also as the soul and conscience of American theatre pushing for theatre as art in the face of crass commercialism. This was really what made Edward Albee innovative—his ferocious defense of theatre as a place of truth-telling and unvarnished honesty—and he inspired a generation of not just playwrights but also artists, composers, performers, and directors in the world of theatre and in the larger framework of art in America to push all art forms beyond the middlebrow and reach for deeper and perhaps darker truths.

In Jackson R. Bryer's interview with Albee, Bryer notes how theatrical Albee's plays are, and Albee responds that "A play has no value unless it can hold the

stage.” And as noted in the interview, Albee grew up in the theatre: As the adopted child of a descendant of the co-founder of the Keith-Albee vaudeville theatres, he was constantly exposed to not only theatre but also to the many performers who lit the stage during the early twentieth century. More importantly, Albee mentions his early aspirations to be a composer and points out, “I think I learned more about dramatic structure from Beethoven than I did from anybody,” and then details the various techniques that he learned from music, which are clearly apparent in the structure of his dialogue and in particular in the monologues that read and especially play as a kind of aria.

Contemplating the realm of the theatrical brings to mind the practicality of making theatre and learning one’s craft. A real concern for Albee was encouraging fellow playwrights and artists of all kinds. Within the world of the theatre, Albee was one of the most accessible of American theatre artists; his phone number was listed in the Manhattan white pages, and he made himself available to students, scholars, and journalists throughout his career, often traveling across the country to teach at innumerable locations at universities, theatres, and conferences. In comparison to Albee, none of the other iconic American playwrights (O’Neill, Williams, Miller) attempted to connect so richly or deeply with students, scholars, and critics in an ongoing process. And Albee did this from the earliest point in his career, after his first successes, and continued to do so until near the end of his life, well into his eighties.

Again, unlike any of the earlier great American playwrights, Albee specifically donated his own funding and support not just for other playwrights but also for designers, visual artists, composers, and writers through his William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, which is a project of the Edward F. Albee Foundation, to which his entire estate was donated at his death. Albee’s support for other playwrights first began shortly after his success with *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, with the Albee-Barr-Wilder Playwrights Unit, which he funded partly with the profits from that Broadway production, and his mentoring never abated. This fact sets Albee apart from just about every other major American playwright—his generous and vociferous support for writers and for all the arts.

Albee was innovative theatrically also in the *business* of playwriting as a life-long member of the Dramatists Guild, and his influence there was integral to the central function of the Guild, which is to protect the rights of dramatists and the plays they write. Albee’s control of his work was unlike any other playwright in the U.S., and he flexed those muscles more frequently than most playwrights, having the final say over the physical design of his productions but also in terms of casting, direction, and advertising. Albee became the conscience of the Dramatists Guild and the champion of playwrights everywhere.

Unlike screenwriters, playwrights own their plays and *lease* them for production, and not a word may be changed without their permission. This fact sets theatre apart from other art forms like film and television, where the writer is at the bottom of the food chain. Albee was perhaps the most powerful writer within the field of playwriting and had the most control over his plays—and he asserted that control in ways that were remarkable in the field of playwriting, as documented in an essay by one of the editors of this volume. Some might even characterize Albee's obsession with controlling every aspect of production as fanatical and a bit tyrannical. Yet in doing so, Albee protected the nature of theatre as an art form that begins with the writer. Despite the fact that American theatre veers ever more toward the director's vision, and very few American playwrights assert the kind of control that Albee regularly demanded from theatres, producers, and directors, Albee's legacy in the American theatre set a standard that raised the prestige of the playwright.

In addition to Albee's influence through his control of rights, he was innovative in the theatre by directing his own plays. This is not true of any of his major predecessors, and though he was criticized at times for doing so throughout the early part of his career, it turned out to be one of the important impetuses to his late career success. Albee was able to develop his work by directing it outside of the Broadway theatre, in both the regional theatre and, more importantly, outside of the United States, by directing in England and in Austria, at the English Theatre in Vienna. Like his contemporary Maria Irene Fornes, who also directed her own work and was also criticized for that aspect of her theatrical involvement, Albee felt that if he was able to control every aspect of a production, he was better able to create his play as a lived experience for his audience. Ironically, of course, Albee also stated quite often that his plays were ultimately best received through being read. However, like European playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter, Albee was a man of the theatre, having been trained in his directing skills by one of the best directors on the Broadway stage, Alan Schneider, who became known for his work with postmodern and absurdist playwrights.

In addition, Albee's major theatrical innovation came from his own ability to blur the lines among playwriting, music, and visual art. Albee was obsessed with classical music growing up and carefully cultivated a knowledge of classical music throughout his life, and he spent his early career in both an artistic and personal relationship with William Flanagan, the composer protégé of Aaron Copeland. Albee was also closely connected with the major visual artists of his times: Jasper Johns, Louise Nevelson, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, and the list goes on and on. He was not only personally and intimately connected with these artists but he also collected their art (and others') for the duration of his life.

Albee carefully cultivated the work of emerging artists and composers through his Foundation, and his own work as a playwright was transformed by this intermingling with other art forms—something that emerges in many of his plays that have strong connections to experiments in music and theatrical spectacle. David Crespiy documents Albee's lifetime of connections with all the arts but particularly with the realm of theatrical design with his essay, "Designing Edward/Edward Designing: A Brief History of Edward Albee's Role in Theatrical Design," in which he demonstrates that Albee's innovative and intimate relationship with the physical reality of creating theatre is thoroughly revealed in what many consider Albee's highly unusual control over the production values of his plays.

Edward Albee was one of America's most international playwrights, and his work continues to receive productions and accolades overseas partly because Albee was a passionate supporter of writers' rights across the globe. Albee's presence in the international theatre was initiated by his very first foray into writing plays, with the premiere of his *The Zoo Story* in Berlin in 1959, and the playwright's continued international connection lasted with his productions in Vienna at Austria's English Theatre and on London's West End well into his eighties. For years, Albee worked closely with Martha Coigney, Director of the U. S. Center of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), spending several years as the president of ITI's U.S. chapter. Albee won the Pen/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Awards in 1999, and as a longtime champion for human rights with the international writers' organization PEN, Albee has spoken against censorship of dissidents in dictatorial, repressive societies elsewhere.

Albee was a peripatetic traveler, making close friends internationally, and he even quipped that he was probably more of a European playwright than an American one.⁸ In fact, some of the most important growth in research in Albee's plays has come from abroad, where the influence of his plays had a transformative effect on those countries' theatres. In Julia Listengarten's essay in this volume, "Affecting the Lives of 'Others': The Journey of Albee's Plays in the Soviet Union," it becomes clear that Albee's influence was profound in the Soviet Union. She notes that because of communist censorship, while "Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco were mostly unknown to Soviet readers and spectators, Albee's work introduced aspects of absurdist philosophy and sensibility to Soviet theatre makers and audiences." The same is true of fascist Spain, according to Ramón Espejo Romero in his "The (Mis)Representation of Edward

8 David Richards, "Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken," *New York Times*, June 16, 1991, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-road.html>.

Albee in Spain, 1963–2010.” Though quite often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and even loved for all the wrong reasons, Albee’s plays have been produced in Spain for over fifty years. For Spanish audiences and critics, Albee’s greatest work was not *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* but his adaptation of Giles Cooper’s *Everything in the Garden*, which was found far more titillating and provocative! And yet, Albee’s work slipped through the fascist censors while other major European playwrights, like Brecht, were not permitted.

We hope that this volume provides a leaping off point for future scholarship into Albee’s innovations—dramatic and/or theatrical—and especially as Albee’s plays have been produced, critiqued, and investigated across the world. We both feel that the future of research into Edward Albee’s innovative techniques will be buoyed by an international approach that takes into consideration how these plays have become a departure point for change in many different cultures, identities, and aesthetic techniques.

Designing Edward/Edward Designing: A Brief History of Edward Albee's Role in Theatrical Design

David A. Crespy

Abstract

Delving deeply into a selected history of Edward Albee's connection with theatrical design, and his relationship with his designers, this article seeks to tease out not only Albee's unusual rapport with designers but also his life-long bonds with many different types of artists outside of the theatre, including visual artists, composers, and sculptors, all of whom influenced the nature of Albee's playwriting. Also discussed in this essay is Albee's presence as an occasional curator, mentor, and purchaser of art in the New York art scene. The nature of visual and aural spectacle in Edward Albee's own plays was deeply influenced by these affiliations with artists, and here too, the author attempts to analyze the dramaturgy of Albee's drama through the lens of theatrical design. What becomes important is Albee's innovation in the promotion of emerging art and artists, a project which he engaged in from the earliest point in his career to his final years as one of America's leading dramatists.

The title of this article suggests that when a designer, whether of scenic, costume, lighting, or sound design, worked on a professional production of a play by Edward Albee, they were working on Edward Albee himself—and the opposite might very well have also been the case. In the historical study that follows, it's clear Albee had designs on the work of his designers, and his influence on the relationship between playwrights and designers was particularly innovative and unusual. It is notable too that unlike any other major American playwright, Albee was specifically involved with the visual art scene in New York and in many other locations across the country. As a major collector of art, and a close personal friend to major artists, Albee's presence as an occasional curator, mentor, and purchaser of art was a well-established aspect of his New York existence. The playwright was also the chief benefactor and executive of the Edward Albee Foundation, an organization that provides residencies for artists of all types—composers, sculptors, painters, and writers with whom he maintained personal contact as well, and his entire estate has been donated for the continued operation of the Foundation after his death. No other major American playwright has so allied himself with artists in so many fields in such

a manner. These factors relate closely to why Albee was personally and inextricably involved in all aspects of the major productions of his plays, and unlike most American playwrights, who might be occasionally asked by the director if they liked a design choice, Albee's influence was contractual.

Jonathan Lomma, Albee's agent at William Morris Endeavor, in a telephone conversation with the author on May 31, 2018, noted that Albee had the final say for many years, not only on his productions in New York but in all professional productions of his plays everywhere, and Albee asked to see the set for productions before he permitted licensing of his plays. This was a highly unusual arrangement, challenging for Albee's representatives to enforce, a daunting experience for theatres wanting to produce his plays, and, eventually, after many years, it was changed. While most Dramatists Guild contracts provide artistic approval for choice of designers, Albee's final say might include the color and angle of the lighting; the ground plan and dressing of the set; the color, contour, and material of the costumes; or even the quality of the sounds that occupied the corners of the audience's attention. It's important to note here that Edward Albee was not simply a "control freak" playwright attempting to wrest the role of the director or the designer from the hands of professionals. Rather, Albee was similar to his mentor Samuel Beckett, who began as a playwright but evolved into a role akin to that of a performance artist.

Though Albee's level of involvement was unusual in the realm of playwrights and playwriting, the innovations in his hands-on approach to design offer playwrights an opportunity to take more responsibility for the physical world of their plays, and it suggests the type of innovative auteur approach to playwriting that has been practiced somewhat differently by other major American playwrights, such as Maria Irene Fornes or Richard Foreman. Albee's innovation was that he made himself a welcome member of his production team, working as a master artist in a realm with which, after years of directing himself, he was quite familiar. Lawrence Sacharow, the director of the American premiere of *Three Tall Women*, collaborated very closely with Albee on the production, which had previously received its world premiere at the English Theatre in Vienna under Albee's direction, and the process was a positive one. Sacharow notes:

his perceptions and his insights were enormously useful in helping solve the problems. So I loved his notes. He's a real artist, and a real artist knows how to talk about art and can talk in terms of unlocking creativity rather than dictating how it should be done. He opened up possibilities.¹

1 Solomon, *Albee In Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 247.

It should be noted here as well that especially from his mid-career and forward, Albee quite often directed the first productions of his plays so that he could see the play as the playwright intended (and Albee had the habit of referring to himself in the third person when he directed), leaving his New York premieres in the hands of trusted directors like Emily Mann, David Esbjorbsen, Lawrence Sacharow, and Pam McKinnon.

Albee did direct, however, nearly all of his plays and many of the premieres, and quite often he directed first productions of his plays in Europe, in Vienna, at the English Theatre, which was itself an innovation.² It is particularly important that he did so as, unlike other playwrights who left rather specific stage directions in their scripts, Albee was sparing even to the point of being somewhat cryptic in his descriptions of the physical world of his plays, as will be explored below. Luckily, much of his work as a director and his interaction with designers was documented in Rakesh Solomon's excellent volume, *Albee in Performance*, which closely describes Albee's choices in the staging of his plays. What follows then is an exploration of Albee's own investment in the design of his plays, examining the stage directions he wrote describing scenic elements at the beginnings of the plays themselves as well as descriptions of Albee's interactions with designers in the professional world of theatre, following a rough chronology of several productions in which he was directly involved.

1 Edward Albee and the Visual Arts

But before that process of analysis begins, there is also another element to discuss in terms of Albee's sense of design and visual sense, touching upon Sacharow's comments, and that is Albee's astonishing depth of knowledge and ease in working with artists in general. This gave him an impressive skill set when approaching painters, sculptors, composers, and writers in other fields. The playwright's massive accumulation of art, which was auctioned by Sotheby's in September of 2017, suggests that Albee's erudition within the field of visual art was surprisingly deep, thorough, and broad. As he noted himself:

A playwright puts down on the page what is to be seen and heard—either on the stage or in the eye and ear of the receiving mind. Playwrights are highly visual folk; we must—if we are to be any good—hear time like

2 Ibid., 6; Crespy, "‘Coming Back a Short Distance Correctly’: Albee's Absurdist Adventures in Berlin, Moscow, and Vienna," in *Edward Albee and Absurdism*, ed. Michael Y. Bennett (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 126–142.

a composer and see space like a painter or sculptor. Therefore, it does not surprise me that I tried to be both a composer and a painter in my teens—was better, but not much, at the second than the first—and have now an encyclopedic knowledge of classical music and an assemblage of between three and four hundred art objects.³

Albee's collection was mostly twentieth-century fine art by major artists—Jean Arp, Milton Avery, Wassily Kandinsky, and Lee Krasner, for example, but it was filled also with work by early career artists as well as unique, primitive, and “found” objects often created by indigenous peoples, including African masks and Dogon doors. Albee had lifelong relationships with visual artists, including Louise Nevelson, the brilliant sculptor whose life Albee captured in his play *Occupant*. And he counted Avery, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, and Betty Parsons among his friends in Montauk, where he lived in Long Island with his life-long partner, Jonathan Thomas, an important American sculptor. Albee was always on the lookout for art by early career artists, purchasing their work, providing mentorship, and frequently encouraged them to take advantage of his Foundation for support. The entire proceeds of the 2017 auction of Albee's collection at Sotheby's mentioned above was to benefit his Edward Albee Foundation to support artists, composers, and writers in perpetuity. Albee demurred when he was asked about its value, not really sure what any of it was worth, as he explained:

I rely totally on my own taste and experience and the most important thing is to show the art in context so that an African head next to a Cubist canvas can teach each other something. I'm always moving things around to get new contexts. I've also got more than a hundred pieces of ‘found’ art—African game boards, for instance, which look like beautiful sculpture to my eye.⁴

The connection among Albee's life long interest in visual art and sculpture, his obsession with music (especially classical and chamber music), and his hands-on support for artists of every kind at his William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center (nicknamed “the Barn”), funded by the Edward Albee Foundation, has had a huge, and sometimes very visceral impact on Albee's

3 Albee, “Informed Joy,” in *Stretching my Mind* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 110.

4 Jeremy Eccles, “Accumulator Profile: Edward Albee,” *Australia's Art Market Report*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.artmarketmonitor.com/2011/03/08/collector-profile-edward-albee/>, accessed May 22, 2018.

connection with the notion of spectacle in the theatre. Albee provided not only the financial support for the artists through the Foundation but also spent a great deal of time recruiting and selecting the artists who were invited to use the facilities, visiting with the artists as they worked in their studios, and remaining an important mentor as their work at his Foundation led many of them into significant careers.

Because Albee spent much of his time observing and supporting artists of all kinds, he knew that creative spirits needed space and privacy to do their work, and thus he always gave his directors and designers room and space to explore. But as with all his major professional premieres, he was also very much present there in the flesh with very clear opinions, and more importantly, questions. This was the case in his relationships with the artists at his “Barn” in Long Island, those in the galleries of lower Manhattan, and even in Houston, where he taught playwriting at the University of Houston from 1989 to 2003.

Albee became an active member of the Houston art scene, and one major Houston artist, Nestor Topchy, spent a great deal of time with Albee, crediting the playwright with having catapulted several young artists’ careers from obscurity into national attention, including Kevin Cunningham, who became a major multimedia digital artist and founder and Executive Artistic Director of 3-Legged Dog Media and Theater Group and 3LD Art & Technology Center. Topchy believed Albee enlivened the Houston art scene, visiting studios on the University of Houston campus and challenging young artists to excel in writing. He notes:

It would not be fair to speak for Edward, but the sense of object and presence that is shared in place and person is needed in art, and it will be more so as technology makes it easier to hide from ourselves and others, making us more selfish and narcissistic. Edward’s work is there to give everyone the good swift kick in the behind they deserve, to pay attention to what we are doing and not doing, to live fully, and an admonishment to start living, now.⁵

Topchy went on to paint a portrait of Albee with Elizabeth McBride, a Houston artist, author, and art critic and a mutual friend, who sat with the playwright for the portrait and recalled Albee’s constant support. Rachel Hecker, another

5 Betsy Huete, “The Houston Art Scene Remembers Edward Albee,” *Glasstire {Texas visual art}*, September 24, 2016, <http://glasstire.com/2016/09/24/the-houston-art-scene-remembers-edward-albee/>, accessed June 3, 2018.

Houston artist, recalled Albee “wandering in and out of the painting studios at UH on several occasions, motivated only by his own restless curiosity.”⁶

Albee wrote extensively about art, and much of that writing was compiled in his collection of essays titled *Stretching My Mind*. He curated shows with friends and other collectors (though Albee insisted on being called an “accumulator” rather than a collector, as he felt the term collector was pretentious). In 1997, he co-curated with Roy R. Neuberger an exhibition presented at the Neuberger Museum at Purchase College titled “Eye-to-Eye,” in which the two collectors selected work from each other’s collections. Albee’s penchant for “accumulating” art was articulated on one of the panels illustrating the exhibition, a wall label, which quoted Albee saying, “It is much more interesting if you have a few dollars to put them on your walls rather than in a bank.”⁷ A critic reviewing the exhibit, Vivian Raynor, notes that Albee’s own tastes veer generally for abstraction that is as precise as his prose—biomorphic, in the case of Jean Arp’s blue and green “clouds” floating in a field of white, but more often geometric, as in the beautiful 1930 Kandinsky of white rectangles and squares piled against a black background. She also finds that in Albee’s pieces, “three dimensional geometry catches the collector’s eye,” noting that “David Craven’s impossible relief of wood triangles butted together and painted pale blue” is particularly arresting. But Albee’s interest in indigenous and primitive art is perhaps predominant, and Raynor points out that the “champion” of the collection is an “unnamed Zairean craftsman” whose “large and complicated mask” with elaborate carvings is particularly impressive with black and white striping.⁸

In another, earlier exhibition that Albee curated in 1990, titled “Sooner or Later: Edward Albee’s Eye,” at the Hillwood Museum on Long Island University’s C. W. Post campus in Brookville, the critic Phyllis Braff notes a unifying element:

Power, as his art choices show, can result from awareness being sharpened by a forced focus on a limited number of visual ingredients. These are pared-down abstractions that concentrate attention on qualities of space, design, surface and tone. When the dynamics are right, this proves sufficient for a strong impact.⁹

6 Ibid.

7 Raynor, “Neuberger and Albee Curate Each Other,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/21/nyregion/art-neuberger-and-albee-curate-each-other.html>.

8 Ibid.

9 Braff, “In the Choices of Albee, Imagination Prevails,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1990, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-arteye.html>.

The exhibition was mostly work of younger artists in their thirties and forties, nine artists from Britain, Japan, and the United States, including Farrel Brickhouse, David Hacker, David Ortin, and Zero Higashida, who had received their training on the East Coast. Much of the art presented in Albee's exhibition fell into the 1960s Minimalist tradition, without a "narrative message," and focusing on repetitive forms that retain directness and simplicity but that tended to be "more personal, urgent and varied" and took inspiration "from a wider range of sources." The work had a "certain sense of toughness" in terms of use of materials, color, and surface, and it was "demanding, sometimes aggressive work."¹⁰

2 Albee Stretches His Mind on Art and Design

Albee's own musings on art provide ample opportunity to get a sense of what attracted him to certain artists and styles. As an example, in one essay on the above-mentioned Zero Higashida, then an early career Japanese sculptor, Albee demonstrates an expansive understanding of Higashida's work, referencing several other artists in the process, though simultaneously dismissing such comparisons as premature:

It is not difficult, looking at Zero Higashida's work, to track seeming influences: black painted wood? Oh, that's Nevelson; the brutality of gesture? O, that's Serra. Indeed, a too-quick glance by the instant categorizer at Zero's pieces might lead to such superficial conclusions, but these other artists' ideas are not what Higashida's work is all about. I'm not certain, for that matter, that he knew of either Serra or Nevelson—or a host of other artists—when he fashioned the bed of aesthetic in Japan.¹¹

For Albee, Higashida's work turns the world "topsy-turvy," that "gravity in its physical sense is defied," and that its "balances are askew." But what ultimately excites Albee about the work is that Higashida has somehow brought his Japanese sensibility, whether it be based on "topography, with landscape, with Zen, with the object as philosophical statement—as unique as isolate, mute, and resonating experience" and created something totally new, personal, and while perhaps also engaged in artists like Nevelson and Serra, is utterly unique and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Albee, "Zero Higashida," in *Stretching My Mind*, 141–142.

utterly Higashida.¹² For Albee, what makes the art worth owning is its ability to take one out of one's senses and see the world afresh, through the original vision of the artist.

In other essays in Albee's volume, he goes into great detail about many different artists, including Betty Parsons, the famous gallery owner and artist in her own right; Lee Krasner; Louise Nevelson; Jonathan Thomas (who was also Albee's life partner); Milton Avery; John Duff; and Mia Westerlund Roosen. Albee points out that what "accumulators" such as himself look for "[i]s the artist who follows his own aesthetic nose—unself-conscious but not unself-aware—and whose next inevitable step is always surprising until hindsight makes it all clear to us."¹³ On some level, however, it is clear too that for Albee there is a fundamental energy to a great work of art, and that energy is tied to its utility, its usefulness as a socially engaging instrument for changing its audience's worldview. When asked in one interview in *Stretching My Mind* if there is a particular relationship between theatre and visual art, Albee is quick to respond:

All art is useful, if it's any good at all. It has to be socially useful. Anything that is merely decorative has absolutely no use at all. Anytime I go to the theatre, I feel my time has been wasted unless it has extended the boundaries of my theatrical experience and made me rethink my values. Whenever I look at a painting, I want it to change the possibilities of the art form for me. I want it to expand art in some way that is highly moral because it makes us reevaluate it.¹⁴

As a collector, it's this specific energy that Albee is looking for, the "instinctive tingle" he feels when art is making its audience "examine how we think about things." And he's emphatic that if art does not challenge, and if it "just lies there and is pretty, it is socially corrupt."¹⁵ Albee's sensibilities in art "accumulation" fall pretty much in line with his notions about what he feels his plays do, essentially hold the mirror up to the audience and say, "if you don't like what you see, then change."¹⁶

In his essay, "A Playwright's Adventures in the Visual Arts," Albee makes it abundantly clear that he did not begin his life in the arts as a playwright but rather in drawing and painting "in a constructivist manner," and, at the

12 Ibid., 142.

13 Albee, "Mia Weslund Roosen," in *Stretching My Mind*, 106.

14 Albee, "Instinctive Tingle," in *Stretching My Mind*, 133.

15 Ibid., 133.

16 Ibid., 114.

same time, in building a large connection with musical composition through his connection with William Flanagan and Flanagan's composer friends. Albee very quickly learned through his early exposure to art and music that a playwright is the only writer whose work exists not only in words but, as importantly, as a heard and seen experience. A playwright who cannot "hear" is like a tone-deaf composer; a playwright who cannot "see" is like a weak-eyed or color-blind painter."¹⁷

Albee confesses that at times when he is writing plays, he feels as if he is composing, and what he sees in his mind's eye "has the substance of the visual arts" and notes that it has "some of the complexity of slow dance thrown in."¹⁸ Thus, Albee was as deeply tied to the world of the visual in his plays as he was to the aural imagery in his language, and there are some specific areas in Albee's visual tastes and sensibilities that designers working on his plays should perhaps consider, as Albee notes himself:

My taste in the visual artists tends to run to the nondecorative, the tough rather than the simply pleasing, the abstract rather than the pictorial, and I am drawn to that art which is about art—the Cubists, the Constructivists, the Bauhaus, Duchamp, Bueys, the Abstract Expressionists, and constantly, to the young artists who stand at the edge of the cliff, look over, assume they can fly, jump, and very often, discover that they are right.¹⁹

Albee's involvement with artists was quite visceral: he would go to their studios, particularly those who were in residence at the "Barn"—the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center which is the heart of his Edward F. Albee Foundation, and he would talk to them, engage with the work they were creating. However, Albee specifically avoided giving the artists advice: "I always ask many more questions than I do give answers, which if anything makes a direct statement. They seem to find the questions I ask provocative and useful. A few visual artists are close friends."²⁰ Albee borrowed the technique of questioning from his director, Alan Schneider, who challenged him as a playwright early in his career to think about "what it is like to *be* a playwright."²¹ Albee felt that when he first worked with Schneider on *The American Dream* and on *Who's*

17 Albee, "A Playwright's Adventures in the Visual Arts," in *Stretching My Mind*, 189–192.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 192.

20 Albee, "Instinctive Tingle," in *Stretching My Mind*, 140.

21 Albee, "Alan Schneider," in *Stretching My Mind*, 147.

Afraid of Virginia Woolf? he hadn't yet learned "that I was expected to know what I had done."²² In other words, Albee was forced to think about the many questions that filled Schneider's "thick notebooks" that dealt with "not only the intention of the play, the intention of the particular situation in the play, but the characters themselves, their nature, their background."²³ Albee's own approach to working with other artists, then, including the designers he came to engage with in the professional productions of his plays, was very much a product of this early training from Alan Schneider. With some of this in mind, we may now delve more deeply into Albee's approach to his work with designers.

3 A Brief Chronology of Albee and Design

Albee, of course, didn't start off diving into the realm of design with his early work. When his first play production, *The Zoo Story*, was staged at the Provincetown Playhouse by Richard Barr, with Milton Katselas as a director, Albee was still a neophyte to the theatre, but he *attempted* to get his own way from the start (which is why Katselas got the job). Early on, Albee took a lead role in the production of his plays, encouraged by his producer, Richard Barr, who reminded him that his play was the center of the production—the extension of which was that Albee himself had a central role. As Albee partnered with Barr, the primary producer of Albee's work until Barr's death in 1989, he became more deeply invested in the details of production design. This was because he, along with Barr and producer Clinton Wilder, became a co-producer of his own work—a rather stunning achievement for a playwright in the 1960s, and adding to this, the designer Barr and Schneider selected for that first production of *The Zoo Story* (partnered with *Krapp's Last Tape* by Samuel Beckett) was William Ritman, who would go on to handle design for most of Albee's Broadway and off-Broadway shows into the early 1980s.²⁴ Barr was a particularly important mentor for Albee, as he was not only an experienced producer but also a director who had years of experience working with gifted actor/directors such as Orson Welles, José Ferrer, and John Houseman, on and off Broadway.

For *Krapp/Zoo* (the nickname used for the first Albee-Barr production), Barr selected a design team he felt would be able to work within the tight economics of off-Broadway. He selected a young designer he knew from the John Drew

²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ Crespy, *Richard Barr, the Playwright's Producer* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 118.

Summer Theatre, Fred Voelpel. But Voelpel couldn't commit to the project and suggested another young designer, William Ritman. Brilliantly, Ritman designed the performance space itself, and the individual plays worked within this unit setting. Ritman's concept for *Krapp/Zoo* fit well within Barr's own design experiments, as Barr had himself redesigned theatres with unit sets to accommodate several shows—and this fact had a huge effect on Albee's notions of design in his plays.²⁵

Ritman was a particularly accommodating, accomplished, detail-oriented, and agile designer, as he was comfortable designing setting, costumes, and lighting; happy working either on or off-Broadway in both realistic and non-realistic styles; and was, as Schneider noted, the “first line of regard” when it came to designing not just for Albee, but for Samuel Beckett, Adrienne Kennedy, Tennessee Williams, Joe Orton, Tom Stoppard, Lanford Wilson, and countless other playwrights.²⁶ In his *New York Times* obituary, Mel Gussow, wrote of him:

Mr. Ritman was celebrated for his detailed theatrical versions of apartments and houses—the mysterious mansion-within-a-mansion of “Tiny Alice”; the warm, middle American environment of “Morning's at 7”; “Six Rms Riv Vu”; and the rummage-filled student apartment of “Moonchildren.” ... Theatergoers often felt as if they could move right in to a Ritman set.²⁷

Ritman, a Chicago native who had studied design at the Goodman Theatre, first worked directly with Albee on the production of *The American Dream* from notes written by director Schneider.²⁸ Schneider was, at the time, working on another production at the Actors Workshop in San Francisco and was hoping Albee could be a substitute director until he got there. Of course, Albee's stab at directing in this early attempt was disastrous, leading Gladys Hurlbut, the actress playing Mommy, to quit after discovering from Albee, using Schneider's notes, that she was to play her role as a “tumescant monster.”²⁹

Over the years, Ritman rose to the various challenges presented by Albee's plays, receiving high praise for the “monumental set” of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, his “elegant” sets for *Tiny Alice* (including the “large, scrupulously

25 Ibid., 85.

26 Schneider, *Entrances* (New York: Viking, 1986), 295.

27 Mel Gussow, “William Ritman, Designer, Dies,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/08/obituaries/william-ritman-designer-dies.html>.

28 Ibid., 143.

29 Crespy, *Richard Barr*, 102.

exact model of the castle”), and a “haunting minimalist set design” for the production of *Box-Mao-Box*.³⁰ But Ritman hit a disaster with the last Albee play he designed—the extraordinary, though widely-panned Broadway production of Albee’s adaptation of *Lolita*, the novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Frank Rich was particularly damning, calling Ritman’s set design “hideous and awkward.”³¹ Ritman had predicted the production would be chaos because “the lack of a support system made it inconceivable that the production would ever resemble the original concept.”³² The production had been seriously under financed, and Ritman was concerned that “instead of having an experienced professional handle the projections, there was a photographer in residence, someone who had no experience in slides.” Even the lighting had been affected, with the designer “forced to reduce the wattage on light bulbs from 1000 to 750 watts.”³³ Ritman “was appalled at the atmosphere, and he predicted disaster unless more money were made available.” Albee was horrified that “to save money Sherlock [one of the producers] had Ritman’s sets redesigned without telling the designer.”³⁴ Albee was particularly incensed in this case because despite his later tendency to micromanage design on the stage, he never redesigned anything on his own, as he respected the rights of artists to come up with their own solutions to concerns he raised in production.

After the death of Ritman and so many others in the very tight-knit circle of the Albee, Barr, Wilder team in the 1980s (including Barr, Wilder, and Schneider), Albee never again repeated design teams (though he continued to work with Mark Wright, his production stage manager). All in all, Ritman had designed ten shows for Albee on Broadway and ten productions off-Broadway.³⁵ There were many more designers that Albee would work with, given the length of his career, and there were several that he worked with more than once or twice—but no one had as much influence as Ritman did. Albee was particularly taken, for example, by the talents of Rouben Ter-Arutunian, who designed the premiere of *All Over*; this set was described by Walter Kerr as “a high black

30 Clive Barnes, “Theater: Albee’s Adventurous Plays: ‘Box’ and ‘Quotations of Chairman Mao’ Open,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1968, 39.

31 Frank Rich, “Stage: Albee’s Adaptation of ‘Lolita’ Opens,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1981, C3.

32 Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 318–319.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ritman’s designs for Albee plays included the original productions of *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Tiny Alice*, *Malcolm*, *Everything in the Garden*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Box / Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, and several subsequent revivals.

vault in which cold spotlights replace stars and a few pieces of brown leather furniture seem to have been left in the dark out-of-door for the weather to get at them.”³⁶ It is notable that Albee was very involved with the design of *The Lady from Dubuque*, as it became clear that Albee liked the “spare Bauhaus look” of Ter-Arutunian’s set, and became quite unhappy with director Schneider’s decision to “introduce stools, cushions, pillows, books, and similar everyday items” to have the set be more conventional and workable for actors movement and behavior.³⁷ Albee’s desire for the set to be more “abstract and stylized” went directly against Schneider’s desire to root the play in reality, even as it frequently leapt into the strange, uncanny world of terminal illness. Albee had his reasons for the abstraction. The characters of Oscar and Elizabeth, the actual lady from Dubuque, operate as a kind of ministering “angels of death” in the play, and their entrance at the end of the first act heralds an enormous shift into a netherworld between life and death. The second act of the play becomes a deep dive into the bizarre, as Oscar and Elizabeth exert supernatural influence over the central character of Sam and his dying wife, Jo, who is essentially wafted away to her eternal rest. The play also features moments when the characters break the fourth wall and address the audience directly—another nonrealistic aspect of the uncanny nature of the play. When pressed, Albee criticized Schneider’s choices this way: “I don’t see how he can ... admire Brecht’s staging concepts as much as he does.... If he was doing *Galileo*, would he insist on doing it in a cluttered living room? Perhaps he would. It would do violence to Brecht’s style.”³⁸

Albee was also very engaged in costume design, working with Jane Greenwood, one of the most talented costume designers on Broadway. Eventually having one hundred Broadway shows to her name, Greenwood’s very first Broadway production was Albee’s adaptation of Carson McCuller’s *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Greenwood’s husband, Ben Edwards, was producing the show with Lewis Allen, and Albee took her aside and said, “you better do the costumes for this.” Greenwood told him “I’d never been south,” and Albee told the then inexperienced designer, “well, you’ll look at the research”—and thus began Greenwood’s amazing career.³⁹ Greenwood later designed three more Albee productions, including two revivals of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

36 Kerr, “All Over”—The Living Are Dead, Too,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1971, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-over.html>.

37 Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 181.

38 Ibid.

39 Eric Grode, “She Sews Actors Into Their Roles,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/theater/theaterspecial/a-lifetime-tony-for-the-costume-designer-jane-greenwood.html>.

in 1976 and 2005, and the 1996 revival of *A Delicate Balance*, for which she was nominated for a Tony award, as well as for the 2005 revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Greenwood would collaborate with Albee on twenty-five productions, focusing primarily on Albee's more realistically-styled shows, such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which Albee had a penchant for directing with an almost totally pure naturalism in terms of design. Albee patterned his work on that done by Ritman, though without Ritman's obvious symbolic touches, such as "a metal American eagle" or an "inverted American flag."⁴⁰ The fact that both Greenwood and Ritman worked with Albee on so many productions suggests that while the playwright was demanding and deeply involved in the minutiae of production design, he received extraordinary loyalty by his designers and learned from their designs when he went on to direct other productions.

Later, when working on the show that revitalized his career, *Three Tall Women*, Albee worked closely with costume designer Ruth Bell for the Vienna production, which the playwright directed himself. He brought in his own sketches and participated in the actual measuring of the actors for their costumes, clearly accessing the drawing talent he had developed as a young man. Kathleen Butler, who played B in the Vienna production, noted that Albee was "very particular about our costumes. He just knew exactly the colors." And even though the actors had not received act two of the script, Albee "specified the hues, fabrics, and designs of its characters' clothes."⁴¹ He wanted the characters to wear silk dresses that showed "identical taste" but from different periods of one life. Albee specified particular pastel colors, and wrestled over what the dress colors should be for the second act. He was after a very nuanced exploration of "WASP wealth" that was "physically elegant, but spiritually and morally deforming." Lawrence Sacharow, the director, noted also that in their preproduction meetings about set, costumes, and lighting, there was "a strong guiding principle inherent in the play that Edward clearly expresses."⁴² What becomes clear is the "simple arithmetic" used to set the characters in their specific time periods, and even in these early discussions, the "unity of character" is found in "choice of fabric," while the "individuality of character" is in "choice of color."⁴³

Albee was equally involved with the lighting of his productions, and working with Robert Hill, a lighting designer on the 1990 production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, directed by Albee and featuring an all star cast of

⁴⁰ Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 114–139.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 245–250.

John Lithgow and Glenda Jackson as George and Martha, it was clear that Albee had very specific thoughts when it came to lighting the world of the play. Hill had spoken to Martin Aronson, the previous lighting designer for a Los Angeles production of the show, and who knew Albee's preferences, and it became clear that "once the lights were up he very much wanted one state of lighting" for all three acts of the play.⁴⁴ Hill pointed out that Albee wanted to light "the reality of the room" without using lights to suggest mood or emotion, preferring to let "the actors take care of all that work" rather than attempt to do their jobs for them. Albee was very firm on the sunrise in the last act, wanting it to be very subtle, but then at the beginning of the play, he wanted a more theatrical quality, with George and Martha "silhouetted in the dimly lit doorway," so that when they turned on the lights, there was "a very high, startling contrast from darkness to light."⁴⁵ Again, when working in the realism of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee preferred to stay perfectly naturalistic in terms of design choices, and quite often when reviewing production designs for the show by theatres seeking licenses, he would turn down sets that were too abstract or conceptual.

4 Albee's Directions toward Design

It helps to deepen the conversation by looking at Albee's own stage directions concerning the visual and aural worlds of his plays—especially those that provide the initial glimpse at the beginning of each script. While designers are not working from just these directions, but from the entire play with all of the clues provided through characterization, plot, dialogue, additional stage directions, and the overall dramatic structure of the play, looking at these initial descriptions of the setting provides some intriguing insights into the stage picture Albee is creating. Though his instructions are very limited in most of his plays, they are precise and provide a window into the sparring ground for his characters. This is quite different from the stage directions given by some of Albee's contemporaries, notably Tennessee Williams, who went to extraordinary lengths to describe not only the physical world of the play but also to define the relationship of playwrights and playwriting in the physical realm of theatre in his introduction to *The Glass Menagerie*:

44 Ibid., 225–226.

45 Ibid.

These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.⁴⁶

Williams goes on in his stage directions at length about theatrical devices as well as about the use of screens and lighting to get at the mood, atmosphere, and theatricality of his play. But in this famous introduction, he was ultimately trying to get at a new kind of theatre that his dramaturgy suggests—a “plastic” theatre. As noted by Richard E. Kramer in his article “‘The Sculptural Drama’: Tennessee Williams’s Plastic Theatre,” Williams was quite elaborate in his scenic descriptions, which “draw on metaphors from the world of art and painting, and his use of sound and light is symbolic and evocative, not just realistic in its effects.”⁴⁷ Intriguingly, Williams’ “plastic theatre” was perhaps most realized in the plays of Edward Albee, who took the next step in the process of realizing this mutable scenic landscape by experimenting wildly and maintaining a physical presence himself in the creation of those worlds on the living stage.

Albee was an admirer and friend to Williams, and Williams and Albee shared mutual influence on each other.⁴⁸ However, in contrast to Williams’ lengthy explanations, Albee’s set descriptions on the page are usually extraordinarily simple, spare, brief almost to the point of retreating from any description at all, preferring to allow the dramatic action to create the physical realm of the play. And yet, lean as his stage directions might be, there is a strong presence of Albee’s hand. In his first play, *The Zoo Story*, the description of the scene is concise to the extreme: “Central Park. There are two benches. As the curtain rises, Peter is seated on the downstage bench. He is reading a book. He stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to reading. Jerry enters.”⁴⁹ There is the bare minimum of information—we know we’re in Central Park in New York City, and there are two benches, one of which is downstage from the other. Yet even with those scant directions, Albee creates a small world as the designer is given strong hints as to the kind of benches. Since we’re in Central Park, they would be Beaux-Art as interpreted by Frederick Law Olmsted and the English

46 Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2011), 53.

47 Richard E. Kramer, “‘The Sculptural Drama’: Tennessee Williams’s Plastic Theater” *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 5 (2002), 1.

48 Crespy, “Inconspicuous Osmosis and the Plasticity of Doing’: the Influence of Tennessee Williams on the Plays of Edward Albee,” in *The Influence of Tennessee Williams: Essays on Fifteen American Playwrights*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008).

49 Albee, *The Zoo Story* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1999), 27.

architect Calvert Vaux, and the relationship of one bench to the other provides a clue—there is a hierarchy created by having one downstage of the other. And of course, we're given Peter's behavior, fastidious to a fault, cleaning his glasses as he reads his book. One could almost imagine this scene in a Milton Avery painting, simple, abstracted, just the bare minimum outlined in a limited palette.

Though a different stylistic vein from the disguised naturalism of *The Zoo Story*, the realm of the absurd in Albee's *The American Dream* gives us yet another minimalist description of the setting:

A living room. Two armchairs, one toward either side of the stage, facing each other diagonally out toward the audience. Against the rear wall, a sofa. A door, leading out from the apartment, in the rear wall, far right, an archway, leading to other rooms, in the side wall, left. At the beginning, Daddy is seated in the armchair, left. Curtain up. A silence, then—Mommy enters from left.⁵⁰

Again, we are given the least amount of description to get at a particular sense of visual setting—two armchairs, which suggests a kind of middle-class or perhaps upper middle-class comfort, as well as a sofa (and I note here that he does not use the word couch), which suggests a certain formality—so already we're given three pieces of furniture that provide an obstacle to movement. Also described are two exits, a door leading out of this world, and another leading deeper into it. Though scant in description, Albee's stage directions give us a distinct sense that the world we're about to enter has distinct limits to it, an exterior and an interior, the visage presented to the world and the one kept hidden from it. These stage directions also make it clear that Albee is setting up a grid for the designer to work from: rear wall, far right; side wall left, providing anchoring for a ground plan which is key for any director on which to build blocking, suggesting flows and patterns of movement.

In Albee's very short play *The Sandbox*, where again he is working within the surrealist realm, the description of the set is more involved, and Albee's precise description of how he wanted the play to be physically and aurally presented is given particular detail in Solomon's *Albee in Performance*. The scenic description in the playscript itself is given almost as a kind of Rothko painting:

Scene. A bare stage, with only the following: Near the footlights, far stage right, two simple chairs set side by side, facing the audience; near the footlights, far stage left, a chair facing stage right with a music stand

⁵⁰ Albee, *The American Dream* (New York: Dramatists Play Service).

before it; farther back, and stage center, slightly elevated and raked, a large child's sandbox with a toy pail and shovel; the background is the key, which alters from brightest day to deepest night.⁵¹

Again, while remaining quite spare, Albee's stage directions specify spatial relationships that suggest not only pictorial composition but also movement, pacing, hierarchies of place, hints at style and mood, and visual humor. The physical action of the Young Man, his calisthenics, is given a metaphysical boost by his description as being the Angel of Death. Overall, we now have a setting that is in motion, almost a kind of happening, even before the dramatic action of the play begins. The physicality of the Young Man is very much reminiscent of Louise Nevelson's drawing "Untitled: Male Nude" owned by Albee, which features a massive, brutal figure with bulging biceps and obscenely bulky shoulders, his arms flexed like that of a muscle-bound angel.

For a production of *The Sandbox* directed by Albee in San Francisco in the 1980s (years after its original production directed by Albee's producer, Richard Barr in 1960), Solomon notes that Albee's direction of the play was particularly precise when it came to both the musical and sound design elements. A case in point was Albee's insistence on exactness of timing required for the actor playing the musician (not an actual musician, because a musician wouldn't be quite precise enough for Albee's tastes!) to mimic playing the clarinet along with a recording, which Albee provided. Sound design was particularly important in this production, and in all productions with which Albee was personally involved, and according to Solomon, Albee was insistent on precise implementation of what he desired:

He directed that the taped clarinet music be played only through the stage left speaker, since the musician sat on that side; in addition, he worked to modulate the three offstage rumbles into deep, long rolling sounds that became progressively louder, more violent, and more frightening.⁵²

The music for *The Sandbox* is included in the Dramatists Play Service publication, and was composed by Albee's mentor and lover, the late William Flanagan, a protégé of Aaron Copeland, Arthur Honegger, and Arthur Berger, who had committed suicide. The music to *The Sandbox* was particularly meaningful for Albee and was meant as a memorial to his lover. The published sheet music

51 Albee, *The Sandbox and The Death of Bessie Smith (with Fam and Yam)* (New York: Plume, 1987), 8–9.

52 Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 95.

has the exact cues with designated lines notated with the melody. In the production Albee directed, Solomon highlights Albee's attention to the "proper sequence of events," with Albee noting where the character Mommy tells the cellist to begin, and then instructing the actor rather than to play, to "rearrange the music sheet, extend his arms to bring the clarinet to his lips, etc." The playing didn't actually begin until "the departing Mommy and Daddy are 'just out of sight.'"⁵³

Solomon notes also that Albee's insistence on such specific timing was tied to Albee's concept that playwriting was akin to composition. This is a point that Albee also makes in an interview with Edwin Wilson for Wilson's Spotlight Series for CUNY Television.

I slowly began to realize that writing a play has a lot in common with writing a piece of music, writing a string quartet. The characters are instruments; themes, ideas, and musical themes are quite related, even though you don't get the simultaneity of three or four people speaking at the same time, you have the illusion of string quartet writing. The literal structure of a play and the structure of a string quartet are quite often the same. There are a lot of similarities. They are both performed as out loud pieces, and a playwright notates very much the way a composer does.⁵⁴

Since Albee was essentially a playwright raised by composers, spending his early years in Greenwich Village with a pack of musicians led by his then partner, William Flanagan, his demand for precision spilled into different realms, including the aural world of his play. Albee, like Wagner, wanted to control all the elements of production, and Solomon points out Albee's similarities in his demand for fidelity to his vision to other twentieth-century playwrights: "Albee's requirements did not exceed the practices of other modern playwright-directors, especially when compared to the rigorous rehearsal demands of two of the most influential dramatists of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett."⁵⁵ Solomon notes that Brecht "spent hours in rehearsal exploring how Galileo would handle a telescope and an apple" and that Beckett's "rehearsals reveal extraordinarily precise demands" with notebooks containing "diagrams of actors' movements in far more detail than is necessary for simple blocking."⁵⁶ Since Albee often cited Beckett as a mentor and influence,

53 Ibid., 93.

54 Edwin Wilson, *Spotlight*, CUNY TV/Center for Advanced Study of the Theatre Arts (CASTA), 23 May 1989, <http://www.cuny.tv/show/spotlight/PR2005365>, accessed 28 May 2018.

55 Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 12.

56 Ibid., 94.

it makes sense then that this exact control of particular elements of design was passed down between these two avant-garde writers, though Beckett was perhaps even more exacting in his demands.

Albee's spare set descriptions continued with his first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which gives nothing more than "The living room of a house on the campus of a small New England college." And we know very little about the setting except that Martha reveals that it's not a spectacular living space, with her famous "What a dump," quoting from an unnamable Bette Davis film (and despite Martha's best attempts, it was from *Beyond The Forest*). We do get brief stage directions elsewhere in the play, which point out that there is a front door we can see, a portable bar, and a hall leading elsewhere from the living room. In *A Delicate Balance*, a similarly (and seemingly) naturalistic play for which Albee won the Pulitzer Prize, the setting is described in similar and equally sparse terms: "A living room of a large and well appointed suburban house. Now." And again, we are introduced quickly to the shelf of "cordial bottles," to get at the central engine of drinking that once more, perhaps with a somewhat gentle throb, fuels the drama of the play. The major difference is the economic situation of the two different households although through the action of the plays, both are clearly built on unstable relational foundations. But for designers looking for cues in Albee's initial set descriptions, there is not much to go on, and Albee clearly intends for them to dig into the dramatic structure of the play, the dialogue, and the physical actions to create the visual and aural realms that will set the stage. It is also deeply important that Albee, as a frequent director of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was forever in debt to his original designer, Ritman, whose realistic design was fastidiously attended to not only by the director and playwright but also by the producers, as noted by actress Uta Hagen:

There were so many cockeyed things in that production ... I hated that set. I thought it came right out of the Goodman Theater. And when I saw all those books. I thought, we've got to play in front of all those books: red and blue and grey. At one point they were picking fabrics for the sofas, Richard Barr, Clinton, Edward, and Alan picking these fabrics. Then Alan said to me, "Which do you like?" I said I'm not a designer. Where the fuck is the designer? I said you're playing games there decorating living rooms without a designer. I thought the whole thing was put together like that. It's just a *miracle* to me that it worked so well.⁵⁷

57 Gussow, *A Singular Journey*, 175.

Hagen's shock at the playwright, director, and producer's involvement in the design of the production became a theme that would resonate in Albee's later premieres. As mentioned above, from the start of his career, Albee was mentored by Richard Barr and Alan Schneider, both of whom took a hands-on approach to design, and actors and other collaborators, while sometimes surprised, did not evince the level of horror felt by Hagen, a stage veteran of a bygone era.

It is worth noting that in his later plays, Albee did not veer much from his simple but precise description of scenery in his scripts. This is especially true of what Gerry McCarthy terms Albee's "hermetic" plays, those plays in which Albee was experimenting rather adventurously in style and technique.⁵⁸ In the mysterious *Tiny Alice*, Albee offers a more detailed and fascinating description of a mansion within the mansion that is at the heart of his drama, which veers toward a kind of gothic horror:

The library of a mansion—a castle. Pillared walls, floor-to-ceiling leather-bound books. A great arched doorway, U. C. A huge reading table to L.—practical. A phrenological head on it. To R., jutting out of the wings, a huge doll's-house model of the building of which the present room is a part. It is as tall as a man, and a good deal of it must be visible from all parts of the audience. An alternative—and perhaps more practical—would be for the arched doorway to be either L., or R., with bookshelves to both sides of the set, coming toward C., and to have the entire doll's house in the rear wall, in which case it could be smaller—say, twelve feet long and proportionately high.⁵⁹

With *Tiny Alice*, there is much more detailed description of the set provided, with specific locations designated for the large arched doorway and the shelves of leather-bound books, and the strange doll's-house which is key to the dramatic action. It is notable too that Albee is flexible with the placement of the mini-mansion, so as to give a designer options—particularly with the size of the doll's-house, though at any rate, this strange element of the design is to be prominent enough to catch the eye of the audience from any viewpoint. When compared to Albee's earlier works, there is much more description in this initial stage setting, though there is still that same sense of simplicity as

58 McCarthy, "Minding the play: Thought and Feeling in Albee's 'hermetic' works," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen J. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 108.

59 Albee, *Tiny Alice* (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), 22.

if a certain restraint is being demanded of the designer to keep the Gothic quality of the set within particular limits and constrained to a few elements like the phrenological head. One feels the sort of dark, luscious grotesquery contained in Marc Chagall's *Portrait de la Soeur de L'Artist*, which was one of the highlights of Albee's collection.

One of the most abstract of these "hermetic" plays is Albee's *Box, and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung: Two Inter-related Plays*, which was first performed in 1968. Albee depicts the minimalist setting for *Box* as follows:

Curtain rises in darkness. Lights go up slowly to reveal the interior of a large cube. The cube should take up almost all of the small stage opening. The sides are open, and we should see the other sides clearly ... the feeling of a cube. The twelve joins should be painted with glo paint. The lights on the cube stay constant until the final dim out—there should be five seconds' silence.⁶⁰

The setting is as simple as a Milton Avery print or Mark Rothko painting, with stark lines and highlighting for contrast at the "joins" or corners of the cube. The austere setting provides a perfect backdrop for a recorded voice. The scenic description includes directions for the lighting of the set. It is a visual world created as a living, breathing sculpture that takes on a life of itself both connected to and separate from the voice that does not come from the box but "should seem to be coming from nearby the spectator—from the back or sides of the theatre."⁶¹ And the voice itself has a certain quality, per Albee's instructions—not a voice of a young woman nor that of a "crone," but instead Albee suggests "a Middle Western farm woman's voice" to somehow temper the oddness of the setting.⁶²

For the second play, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the setting is described as being within the cube created by the first play: "The outline of the cube remains; the set for *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* appears within the outlines of the cube during the brief blackout."⁶³ After a terse discussion of the musical structure and punctuation notation of the script exhorting the performers to follow the timing and rhythms of the play ("Please observe them carefully, for they were not thrown in like herbs on a salad, to be mixed

60 Albee, *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung; Two inter-related Plays*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 3.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 12.

about.”), the set for *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* is described as, “The deck of an ocean liner. Bright daylight, that particular kind of brightness that is possible only in mid-ocean.”⁶⁴ Again, here the setting is described succinctly, and a kind of naturalism is fitted within the abstraction of the cube, with special attention to the quality of light—a kind of impossible brightness, only occurring onboard a vessel at sea. Here a series of disruptions occurs in the character descriptions that follow—what is Mao doing at the railing of the ship, and why is the minister there? Who is the Long-winded Lady and why is she confined to her deckchair? And finally, who is this old woman, who seems very much like a homeless woman, munching on her apple or orange, her bag at her side, both engaged and disengaged with Mao and the Long-winded Lady? The play, which was created, according to Albee, in a jigsaw puzzle fashion following a process not unlike a kind of Dadaist chance-art structure, proceeds with clear elevations of mood, timbre, rhythm, and melody. It is one of the most “designed” of his plays.

And after the end of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, during what Albee terms the “reprise” of *Box*, the stage directions for the transition are as follows: “Perhaps keep the figures from *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* still and put them in silhouette. Raise the light on the outline of the Box again.”⁶⁵ Again, the simplicity of the description leaves much to the imagination of the director and designer and at the same time suggests an expansive yet minimalist view of the world of the play. Without insisting on a specific design choice, noting the use of the word “perhaps” in the directions, it’s also clear that Albee wants to highlight the geometrical nature of the cube, defining its outline once again at the end of the play. The lean, modernist, abstract description of the setting is in perfect keeping with the precisely nonfigurative quality of those artists whose work Albee “accumulated.” The lines of the cube are put in direct contrast to what might be a somewhat naturalistic depiction of the deck of an ocean liner—and the play, at least visually, is an amalgam of both the naturalistic and non-realistic techniques Albee used in both plays.

But even as lean as the set descriptions are in a “hermetic” work such as *Box* or *Mao Box*, Albee, like Beckett before him, moved deeper into minimalism, as his works became more abstract. Moving to his much later work, in *The Play About the Baby*, there is hardly any scenic description at all:

(Two chairs, identically placed not far from center, slightly diagonally toward one another, walking space between them. Nice light; neutral background.)

64 Ibid., 12.

65 Ibid., 71.

(BOY and GIRL both seated, girl hugely pregnant, she stage right, he stage left; hands folded, facing out).⁶⁶

Again, here the simplicity of the directions belies a larger concern, which is the expanse of space needed for the vaudevillian aspects of the play, which have at the heart of it, the BOY and the GIRL. In the New York production, the director, David Esbjornson, worked with designer John Arnone to create a very specific setting instead of “just chairs and flats,” allowing Arnone to create a “surreal nursery” that was very much in tune with what Albee wanted. The set included a giant pacifier, not unlike something one might see in a Claes Oldenburg sculpture, and large alphabet blocks, with a rocking horse and a baby carriage floating above.⁶⁷

5 Designing and Collaborating with Albee

Esbjornson, who directed both *The Play About the Baby* and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, discussed both experiences with Solomon, and both productions incorporated much of the major scenic, costume, and lighting elements that have recurred throughout much of Albee's oeuvre—including the detailed, highly realistic set dressing of *The Goat* and the highly abstract, fanciful design for *The Play About the Baby*. Working with Albee on those elements had its challenges, as many designers will corroborate, and Esbjornson discovered his way through those challenges. In working on *The Play About the Baby*, Esbjornson noted that his own tendency was to push for “less realism” and that Albee didn't want his plays to “smack of symbolism or metaphor,” since it is already there in the writing. So Albee tended to push for a more “realistic approach.”⁶⁸

However, even though Esbjornson pushed one way and Albee pulled another, they came up with a “happy compromise” in which they took the set Albee had used in the Houston Alley Theatre production, broke it apart “at the top,” and let Esbjornson create a “surreal nursery” for *The Play About the Baby*. It wasn't, as Esbjornson noted, the way he had originally done it, but it was Albee's “notion of how it should be.”⁶⁹ Albee had struggled with the play, originally produced at the Almeida Theatre in London in 1998 and directed by Howard

66 Albee, *The Play About the Baby* (New York: Overlook Press, 2003), 7.

67 Arnone, Design for *The Play About the Baby*, John Arnone portfolio website, <http://www.aronedesigns.com/portfolio/the-play-about-the-baby/>.

68 Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 262.

69 Ibid.

Davies, and then directed the play himself at Houston's Alley Theatre. In the Almeida production, the director had cut what had been a *coup de théâtre*:

In the original script, the evening ended with a coda. An oversize, puppetlike baby crawled on stage, an attempt at a coup de theatre. Mr. Davies had excised the scene from the London production, and now Mr. Albee has restored it, with a Houston actress inside the puppet. But in previews doubts remained. Did the audience realize that this baby was a metaphor? Was it confusing?⁷⁰

The puppet was then eventually excised from the New York production. The production in London had been more naturalistic, "a sparsely furnished loft-like space that could have been the young couple's apartment," but Albee wanted something different in the production he directed at the Alley Theatre, and it became abstract; "the setting is bright, almost bare—two modular chairs and a bench simulating a stage, or what he calls 'a presentational space.'"⁷¹

In one of the more realistic of Albee's later plays, *Three Tall Women*, there is much more of a designer's touch to the stage directions, with specific suggestions for colors, textures, and styles. This is perhaps because the play and its central character were very much tied to the real tastes of his own mother, who adopted him, and who would figure as the template for many of the women in Albee's plays. Again, using a limited palette, the stage directions offer:

The play is set in a "wealthy" bedroom, French in feeling. Pastels, with blue predominant. A bed upstage center, with a small bench at its foot. Lacy pillows, a lovely spread. Nineteenth century French paintings. Two light armchairs, beautifully covered in silk. If there is a window, silk swags. Pastel carpeted floor. Two doors, one to left, one to right. Archways for both.⁷²

Here the details belie a specificity that moves beyond Albee's usual spare set descriptions. From the set description, we are to have a clear sense of wealth, as defined by A's petite bourgeoisie Francophile sentiments, along with touches of lace, silk, and artwork that reinforce the distinctly old-fashioned,

⁷⁰ Gussow, "Arts In America; Albee Takes His Disappearing Baby To Houston," *New York Times*, April 12, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/12/theater/arts-in-america-albee-takes-his-disappearing-baby-to-houston.html>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Albee, *Three Tall Women* (New York: Dramatic Play Service, 1994), 4.

conservative values accentuated by nineteenth century French paintings. The archways for the doors are reminiscent of those used in Albee's *The American Dream*, and have a similar function—one leads to the bathroom and the private interior of A's life and the other to A's exterior and appearance to the rest of the world. As will be later documented in this essay, the physical realm of *Three Tall Women* was closely "curated" by Albee in the original productions both at the English Theatre in Vienna, directed by Albee himself, and at the production at River Arts Repertory in Woodstock, NY, directed by Laurence Sacharow.

It is notable that in one of his last major plays, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, Albee all but eliminated any description of the setting at all, simply describing the setting as a living room. But it is clear from his interactions with his director, David Esbjornson, that Albee was very clear about what he was interested in, but only after Esbjornson and his designer, John Arnone, came up with what they considered to be a non-realistic approach to Albee's essentially realistic play, though attempting to get at Albee's "visualization of the set," as Esbjornson explains:

John [Arnone] and I basically created the whole idea of the columns and the upper level. And we wanted it to have a little bit of classical quality to it, a Greek-tragedy quality. So we had that basic plan. When I first read the script I was a little confused by the dialogue that suggested they were in the city. It talked about city needs and all this stuff. And so my original design with John was more oriented towards an apartment, and then Edward said, "Oh no, they are in the suburbs." And then he talked about the Bauhaus style and what an architect would do."⁷³

Albee actually wrote in lines to explain Martin's taste as an architect in his own home and then later removed them once the design created by Arnone articulated that in a clearer physical way. For Esbjornson, the play evolved into a more non-realistic design as Albee accepted that "the fragmentation that the set has toward the top, a kind of abstraction with which I was very pleased because I think Edward's plays can sustain something other than pure realism."⁷⁴ However, Albee was more insistent on realism in other ways for *The Goat*, as documented by John Arnone's experience dealing with the dressing of the set. Arnone, who designed the set for Albee's *The Play About the Baby* off-Broadway as well as the Broadway premiere of *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*,

⁷³ Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 259.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

had a particularly intense experience synthesizing the two worlds of Albee's visual art and Albee's theatre, recalling a particularly hair-raising experience during *The Goat*:

When we did *The Goat*, Edward argued about the design "I want that to be this," and "it's got to be three walls" and "this has to go there or there," but the evolution of the design was such that a certain abstraction began to creep in to the point where Edward actually embraced it and wanted us to expand on the abstraction of it. And that was a play about an architect who just won the Pritzker prize, so the amount of detail in terms of the realism was exhausting. I went to Edward and I said I don't know any Pritzker architects. What do they live in? What have you written here? And he said, "Well, you know, man, just come down to my loft, and we'll go through the art." So you go down to this loft and there are these African sculptures and paintings from the 20s and 30s that are worth millions of dollars. And I said Edward, I can't begin to afford this stuff. And he said, "Oh, dear boy, afford it, we're going to put it in the van and take it down to the theater right now. And I called the producers and said "Help, help, we're coming down in a van with priceless African sculpture and priceless paintings from the 20s. What's the insurance policy on this?" And we had to build special vaults to lock the stuff in every night. You know, special insurance had to be taken out just to cover it. But for Edward, it was the answer to all of our dressing problems. "Just pick from my personal art collection and we'll have it made." And indeed that sort of authenticity made the day. To do paintings that would have been prints, or to do African art that was fake would have been very obvious, because it was a very small theater. And the audience was very much on top of things. There was a little bit of a problem in that Mercedes Ruhl has to smash half of everything when she throws several fits in anger at her husband so that that was a bit nerve-racking also.⁷⁵

Arnone's experiences with Albee suggest that the separation between the world of art and the world of theatre was a thin one and that the realistic details required for a home of a Pritzker architect required certain elements that Albee, being firmly ensconced in the world of art and architecture as an "accumulator" and close friend to many major artists, could not abandon.

75 Jerome Weeks, "John Arnone: Dallas' Master Set Designer," *Art & Seek*, 23 Feb 2011, <http://artandseek.org/2011/02/23/john-arnone-dallas-master-set-designer/>.

In his last major play, *Me, Myself & I*, the setting is given the barest of descriptions, with the first “pre-scene” occurring before a red curtain, with the character of OTTO, very specifically spelled in all capital letters, literally giving a “curtain” speech followed by a bit of an exchange with otto, his identical twin, whose name is specifically spelled in lower case. The second scene of act one, which really begins the action of the play, is described this way:

The set: No naturalistic enclosures, furniture for various scenes in space required. Flats and blacks. The Bedroom. Mother and Dr. propped up in bed. Mother in nightdress; Dr. fully dressed, if under covers, hat beside him, snoring loudly. Mother stage left, Dr. stage right. Mother reading.⁷⁶

This setting provides the perfect ambiguity for a landscape that explores the “uncanny symmetry” of identical twins, with one twin seeking to deny the existence of the other, and is an expansion on the theme first explored in Albee’s earlier play, *The American Dream*. The play, which draws heavily from the postmodern vaudevillian playbook, features two characters, Mother and Dr., who present images not unlike the characters of Winnie and Willy in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, which are found in bed, at picnic, and in each of the twin’s bedrooms. But the one unique visual moment of the play, and perhaps one of the most unusual stage flourishes that Albee created, occurs at the end of the play when the twins’ father appears. Albee’s directions are:

As OTTO exits upstage left, offstage sounds: trumpets, bells, whips, driver sounds, cart sounds.

Father appears driving a chariot—all the following clearly oversize and fake; papier-mâché, or whatever—pulled by four big black panthers on wheels—clearly fake. On top of it all, a big banner which reads “The Happy Ending!” Chariot driven by Father, filled with huge sacks (fake) filled with huge emeralds (fake); this appears either from upstage center or, if there is no space, from upstage left. All characters onstage freeze.⁷⁷

In a wildly theatrical flourish, and perhaps in homage to Albee’s own roots as the unwilling scion of the Keith-Albee vaudeville empire, the directions emphasize the totally ersatz nature of the elements of the father’s chariot—the black panthers, the fake sacks, the phony emeralds—it is as if Albee has had his twins fathered by a bogus Apollo, who ascends from some hellish place,

⁷⁶ Albee, “Me, Myself & I,” in *American Theatre* 27, no. 10 (December 2010): 62.

⁷⁷ Albee, *Me, Myself & I*, 73.

accompanied by the aural accoutrements of counterfeit deity. The theatricality and outlandish quality of this bizarre chariot is a touch that seems quite against the grain for one of Albee's "hermetic" plays, which typically utilized a minimalist palette. But in fact its strangeness and incongruity has something of a history, with its shocking theatricality not so different from the enormous box in *Box* or the strange dollhouse mansion in *Tiny Alice*. Intriguingly, the entrance of the father, with his rather western cowboy language, seems a vestige from a Sam Shepard play—which would not be entirely out of place. Albee mentored Shepard at the earliest stage of his career at Albee's Playwrights Unit and later directed Shepard's plays. The set for the McCarter Theatre production in 2008, directed by Emily Mann, a long-time Albee collaborator, is described by David Rooney of *Variety*: "Thomas Lynch's arrestingly spare stage-escape—an appropriately blank, vast, paneled space of pale grays and blues, housing only a marital bed or twin beds and stained with insidious shadows by lighting designer Kenneth Posner."⁷⁸ My colleague, Lincoln Konkle, who attended that production at McCarter Theatre, recalled there being a "few lines of wire stretched across that stage, somewhat dividing up the stage, but in no logical way that could be determined." Thus the stage was given a kind of limited definition, suggesting the different rooms, or perhaps different realms of OTTO/otto. It is also evident that the designer, Thomas Lynch, was put to the task by Albee in the creation of the design: "Emily and Tom Lynch and I had lots of discussions about the way the stage should look ... And Tom, after doing 22 separate, different models, came up with exactly what was right."⁷⁹ Though Albee's last play follows the minimalist trappings of his modernist/postmodernist influences from music and visual art, *Me, Myself & I* also seems to thumb its nose at those who would pigeon hole the playwright in one scenic realm or another.

Intriguingly, in working with designers throughout his career, the tug for Albee, as he personally engaged in the physical realm of his plays in full production, was, as always, between realizing the intention that lived within himself and negotiating that distance with the interpretation of his directors and designers, who sought to collaborate with the text. Because of his intense personal connection with artists of all stripes, Albee was uniquely situated as a playwright to engage in ways with the spectacle of the theatre in processes most playwrights are generally excluded from—and cut his own innovative

⁷⁸ David Rooney, *Variety* 409, no. 11 (February 4, 2008): 102–103.

⁷⁹ Carla Baranauckasjan, "No Playwright-Director Tension? Quite a Team," *New York Times*, January 20, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/20albeenj.html>.

path as a playwright navigating the material reality of the plays he created. In so doing, Albee provided new paths for playwrights to pursue the realm of the spectacle in their own work, and in his long history of production, so carefully documented in the work of Rakesh Solomon, directors will find much there useful as they continue to interpret his texts, even as the plays themselves remain somewhat mysterious in the description of the physical realm of Albee's plays.

Theatrical Thanatology: Direct Address, Gestural Storytelling, and the Triple Goddess in Three Plays about Dying by Edward Albee

Milbre Burch

Abstract

This chapter traces Edward Albee's use of direct address, gestural storytelling, and mythic metaphor in service to his thanatological themes in three plays—*The Sandbox* (1960), *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980) and *Three Tall Women* (1991)—in which the playwright places the act of dying at center stage. Using these myriad communication strategies, the playwright offers his audiences (and his readers) a roadmap to our own extinction, challenging us to approach dying intentionally in order to live our lives more fully. The essay addresses Albee's work as an innovator of theatrical thanatology—that is, dramatizing the dying process and modeling interactions between the dying and their caregivers—while writing strong women characters. Each of the plays in this study portrays a woman poised at the border between life and death. Her journey across that border is eased by the appearance of one or more unexpected end-of-life companions. Along the way, the dying women (and their deathbed helpers) share autobiographical anecdotes, addressing the audience directly, if the other characters onstage prove to be bad listeners. When words fail them, their gestures speak volumes about their relationships with others. Finally, in each of these works Albee wittingly or unwittingly invokes the chthonic Goddess Hecate, whose triple aspect allows her to see in many directions at once.

Our birth is nothing but our death begun.

English Proverb



In this study, I trace Edward Albee's use of direct address, gestural storytelling, and mythic metaphor in service to his thanatological themes in three of his plays about dying. Using these myriad communication strategies, the playwright offers his audiences (and his readers) a roadmap to our own extinction,

challenging us to approach dying intentionally in order to live our lives more fully. In fact, the playwright was an innovator in what I call theatrical thanatology, that is, dramatizing the dying process and modeling interactions between the dying and their caregivers. Here, I examine three of Edward Albee's plays—*The Sandbox* (1960), *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), and *Three Tall Women* (1991)—in which the playwright places the act of dying at center stage.

In a 2017 *Economist* article, "Death at the Theatre," a journalist identified as E.B. notes, "Few plays deal directly with death. To be sure, plenty of stage characters die, but the grim fact that ultimately every character will die, along with every member of the audience, is something most playwrights politely overlook. This is understandable."¹ The writer continues, "The certainty of death may be ever-present, but most people come to the theatre to celebrate life. Only occasionally will a play acknowledge that these are two sides of the same coin: that life is precious because it is finite, and the inevitability of death ensnares everyone."²

Albee returned often to the matter of dying—in *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1968), *All Over* (1971), and other works beyond the focus of this study. Christopher Bigsby writes: "Albee, like Beckett, is certainly in no doubt that we are born astride the grave."³ Gabriel Miller agrees that this theme runs throughout the playwright's work: "Ultimately we must learn to confront death—perhaps Albee's central subject—and accept it."⁴ The canon of his work and the scholarship around his plays mark Albee as a raconteur of the mythic, the fantastic, and the familiar, always striving to awaken us to our own impermanence. In Mel Gussow's biography of the playwright, he notes Albee's assertion that "most people spend too much time living as if they're never going to die. They skid through their lives. Sleep through them sometimes. Anyway, there are only two things to write about—life and death."⁵

In the plays studied here, Albee provides the audience a chance to see that terminally ill protagonists and their care-givers both have stories to tell (verbally and visually) and that everyone—the main character, the person who attends her, and the audience—has something to gain by contemplating our

1 E.B., "Death at the Theatre," *The Economist*, May 13, 2017.

2 Ibid.

3 Christopher Bigsby, "'Better Alert than Numb': Albee Since the Eighties," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 161.

4 Miller, "Albee on Death and Dying: *Seascape* and *The Lady from Dubuque*," *Modern Language Studies* 16, no. 3 (1986): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194895>.

5 Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 359–360.

death. As a crafter of plays, Albee acknowledged his debt to the Greeks.⁶ But he eschewed the classical premise of ushering death offstage. Instead he brought the ebbing of life back from the wings, allowing the dying and/or her caregiver to talk about the end, asserting that acknowledgement of death is integral to a fully realized human experience. His dedication to doing so paved the way for Michael Cristopher's *The Shadow Box* (1977), Brian Clark's *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1978), Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), Tony Kushner's two-part *Angels in America* (1991), and Margaret Edson's *Wit: A Play* (1995)—among other contemporary works that allow theatre-goers to grapple with our mortality in ways that the wider culture stringently denies us.⁷

Albee was also an innovator in creating substantial roles for women, starting with Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), written when he was thirty four. A 2018 article in the Books and Arts section of *The Economist* notes, "Martha was not alone. Over the course of a long career ... Albee portrayed women who ran laps around their men. They also get the best lines."⁸ The article quotes dramaturg Matthew Roudané saying, "Albee is one of the few major American male playwrights who really fleshed out female characters in engaging ways."⁹ It concludes, "[Albee's] confidence in the power of women's stories, and insight into the female condition, remain both refreshingly shrewd and troublingly rare."¹⁰ In the plays featured in this study, Albee brings his two innovations together, for he has written strong female characters, patients and/or caregivers, willing to face their lives and speak plainly of their impending deaths.

Each of the plays here portrays a woman poised at the border between life and death. Her journey across that border is eased by the appearance of one or more unexpected end-of-life companions. Along the way, the dying women (and their deathbed helpers) share autobiographical anecdotes, addressing the audience directly if the other characters onstage prove to be bad listeners. When words fail them, their gestures speak volumes about their relationships with others. Finally, in each of these works Albee wittingly or unwittingly

6 David A. Crespy and Lincoln Konkle. "A Conversation with Edward Albee," in *Text and Presentation, 2013: The Comparative Drama Conference Series, 10*, ed. Graley Herren (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2013), 7–18.

7 As in *Wit*, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* addresses *the right to die* of the main character. In Brian Clark's play, the protagonist is a sculptor who has become a quadriplegic. Though he petitions the court to be allowed to die rather than be kept alive against his will, the character is still awaiting the judge's decision at curtain. Both of these scripts can also be seen as examples of theatre-as-advocacy for what became a battle for the right to die with dignity, now championed by law in some states.

8 "Caged Animals: Edward Albee's Strong and Charismatic Women Are Relevant Again," in *The Economist*, April 5, 2018.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

invokes the chthonic Goddess Hecate, whose triple aspect allows her to see in many directions at once.

Classical scholar Sarah Iles Johnston writes that Hecate was “a goddess concerned with women’s transitions and a goddess who guarded entrances and liminal points.”¹¹ Because of these associations, she is known as the Goddess of the Crossroads. In the work of ancient Greek playwrights, women in distress (and those around them) call upon Hecate, sometimes for aid, sometimes out of fear. While contemplating murder, Medea calls her “the Goddess whom I revere most.”¹² When Phaedra is heartsick for the love of Hippolytus, the female chorus wonders if her “wandering mind [is] bewitched by ... Hecate.”¹³ Traditionally, Hecate is considered part of a triad of lunar goddesses. Alongside Artemis bending her bow into a crescent and Selene embodying the orb at its fullest, Hecate personifies the moon’s dark phase. Even so, she is associated with light and is often shown bearing torches. Thus, it was she who illuminated Persephone’s whereabouts after the girl’s abduction by Hades. Within that ancient story, the trinity of Persephone as maiden, Demeter as mother and Hecate as crone evokes the triune nature of womanhood. Hecate herself is often depicted with three faces that enable her to see the world with 360-degree panoramic vision. In two of the plays considered here, Hecate’s specter is raised by dying women, who either recall *or embody* their changing identities as they move through the arc of their lives. In a third, Hecate actually appears as a liminal conductor to help a dying woman travel to the Other Side.

When Albee’s characters walk on stage, their fates have been sealed by the words he has written on the page. But it is the playwright’s hope that we, as witnesses and auditors, will heed the characters’ experiences, becoming more mindful of our own inevitable end. Writing about *Seascape* and *The Lady from Dubuque*, Miller concurs: “It is the audience, whom various characters address in asides during the course of the play, who will receive the full benefit of Albee’s lessons here.”¹⁴ For, as storyteller Laura Simms reminds us, “What happens to the character in the story is not important. What is of value is what happens to we who listen.”¹⁵

11 Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 247.

12 Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, “Medea,” in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, ed. and trans. Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm (New York: Modern Library, 2016), 501.

13 Lefkowitz and Romm, “Hippolytus,” in *The Greek Plays*, 544.

14 Miller, “Albee on Death and Dying,” 155.

15 Simms, *Our Secret Territory: the Essence of Storytelling* (Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications, 2011), 55.

In each of the plays in this study, Albee asks his audiences to recognize death as what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross calls in the title of one book, “the final stage of growth.”¹⁶ Aspects of Kübler-Ross’ work are still controversial fifty years after her first study of the psychological, physical and sociological needs of the dying. But her advocacy of home care and her model of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance as stages in the grief process remain at the frontline of what is now a widely respected palliative or comfort care movement for the terminally ill.¹⁷ Albee’s theatrical exploration of thanatology began before his encounter with her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, but the playwright became an admirer of Kübler-Ross’ work, advocating with her that a lucid assessment of one’s own inevitable end results in an exhortation to live life to the fullest.¹⁸ Kübler-Ross reminds us, “Dying is an integral part of life, as natural and predictable as being born. But whereas birth is cause for celebration, death has become a dread and unspeakable issue to be avoided by every means possible in our modern society.”¹⁹ She continues, “It is difficult to accept death in this society because it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact that it happens all the time, we never see it.... Being part of the dying process, the death, and the burial, including seeing and perhaps interacting with the body, is an important part of coming to grips with death—that of the person who has died and your own.”²⁰ Through the plays examined here, Albee strives to increase our familiarity with the interwoven processes of living and dying by creating people who speak of both in the same breath. When his characters do so in direct address to the audience, theatre-goers—unlike the other characters in a given play—are in no position to silence them.

Albee subtitles *The Sandbox* as “a brief play, in memory of my grandmother (1876–1959).”²¹ In a 2008 interview with Carol Rocamora, the playwright says, “[Grandmother Cotter] was the only one in the family I cared about. She was being pushed to one side, so we were in league against the enemy in the middle.”²² Though Albee is referencing his parents as the enemy, he’s also

16 Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1975).

17 National Hospice and Palliative Care Website, “History of Hospice Care,” <https://www.nhpco.org/history-hospice-care>.

18 Robert Berkvist, “Albee Returns to the Living Room Wars,” review of *The Lady from Dubuque*, dir. Alan Schneider, *New York Times*, 27 January 1980, D1.

19 Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 5.

20 Ibid.

21 Albee, *The Sandbox*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee 1958–1965* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), 87–94. All references to the play are from this edition.

22 Rocamora, “Albee Sizes Up the Dark Vast,” *American Theatre*, January 1, 2008, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2008/01/01/albee-sizes-up-the-dark-vast/>.

gesturing toward an ageist American culture. In a 2017 article in the *New Yorker*, Tad Friend writes, “Ageism is so hard to root out because it allows us to ward off a paralyzing fact with a pleasing fiction. It lets us fool ourselves, for a time, into believing that we’ll never die. It’s not a paradox that ageists are dising their future selves—it’s the whole point of the exercise. The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker codified this insight as ‘terror management theory.’”²³ Friend continues: “Becker wrote, ‘The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.’”²⁴

Within *The Sandbox*, Albee orchestrates what Philip Kolin calls “a serio-comic deathwatch,” painting a musically underscored portrait of the American Way of Death that is both touching and absurd.²⁵ An old woman’s daughter and son-in-law have decided it’s time for her to die, so they have unceremoniously dumped her in a sandbox. When we first see Grandma, she is acting the part of a demented child, shrieking nonsensically at her so-called caretakers and throwing sand at them. But when Mommy and Daddy turn their attention away from her, she drops this charade of incompetence. That’s when she tells *the audience* the story of her life, recounting her experience as a child bride, a widowed mother, and a crone whose circumstances have been reduced to the life of an abandoned pet. She says, “I’m eighty-six years old. I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died when I was thirty.”²⁶ Here the stage directions indicate, “([She] continues, to the audience).”²⁷ For these new listeners, Grandma is plain-spoken in her assessment of her daughter: “My husband died when I was thirty (indicates Mommy), and I had to raise that big cow over there all by my lonesome. You can imagine what *that* was like. Lordy!”²⁸ Warming to her own life story told in brief, Grandma repeats and embellishes the tale with both personal and folkloric imagery: “I had to raise ... that over there all by my lonesome; and what’s next to her there ... that’s what she married.... Rich? I tell you ... money, money, money. They took me off the farm ... which was real decent of them ... and they moved me into the big town house with *them* ... fixed a nice place for me under the stove ... gave me an army blanket ...

23 Friend, “Getting On—why ageism never gets old,” *New Yorker*, November 20, 2017, 51.

24 Ibid.

25 Kolin, “Albee’s Early One-Act Plays: ‘A New American Playwright from Whom Much Is To Be Expected,’” in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 27.

26 Albee, *The Sandbox*, 90.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

with my own dish ... my very own dish!"²⁹ In these descriptions of her own triple aspect—as maid, mother and crone—Grandma provides a quick sketch of Hecate's signature depiction.

Though shunned by her family, the old woman easily engages others on-stage—the Musician and the Young Man—as well as the audience among her listeners. Mommy and Daddy remain unable to see beyond their image of her as decrepit and disposable, so she dutifully performs her death and burial for them. After they depart, Grandma tries to rise from her sandy grave but can't. She may have pretended extinction for her family, but she discovers that she cannot drop the role of a dying woman once they're gone. The Young Man, exercising nearby, moves closer, kneels by the sandbox and reveals, "I am the Angel of Death.... I am come for you."³⁰ In ancient Greece, Hecate's minion was a eunuch-priest, yet here the Young Man demonstrates his occupational potency, for Grandma takes him at his word. Though startled, she does not object to the news of her life's end. Instead, she compliments the Young Man on the delivery of his line. He thanks her as he bends to kiss her forehead. And she responds, "You're ... welcome ... dear."³¹ This is the last line of the play, Grandma *welcoming* Death even as he bends to receive her into his realm. It is the very model of a good death: an unexpected but gentle release.

The stage directions read: "The YOUNG MAN bends over, kisses GRANDMA gently on the forehead..." and then "puts his hands on top of GRANDMA's"—which are crossed over her breast.³² The bending over and kissing may be read as the soothing act of a parent. However, the placing of Death's hands over Grandma's can be read variously—as an act of absolution by a member of the clergy, an act of restraint by a health care worker, or an act of staging by a mortician preparing a body for its viewing. When Albee himself directed the play in 2008, he refined the embodied text to create a different stage picture. Rakesh Solomon writes, "Albee preferred the Angel of Death to seem to 'completely engulf' Grandma.... [He] painstakingly directed the Young Man ... to [kneel,] raise his arms above his shoulders and, like an angel, gently bend over Grandma in order to suggest a 'total enveloping quality.'"³³ This enveloping gesture provides a different reading than the more ambiguous one above. Encircled by

29 Ibid., 91. In fact, Grandma's story evokes a folktale motif found on several continents. It concerns a neglected elder, forced to use a broken bowl or scrap of a blanket. The child who witnesses this ill-treatment at the hands of his parents promises to keep the bowl or blanket to give to them when they are old.

30 Ibid., 94.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Solomon, *Albee In Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 93.

the Angel's imagined wings, Grandma is incorporated into the Great Mystery, gathered in by one who sees and values those who are invisible or have been discarded by the wider society.

Given the brevity of *The Sandbox*, Grandma arrives on the scene with her grief-work nearly done. From the stories she tells, the audience knows that at the end of her life, she remains unbowed by longevity or by her daughter's neglect. She accepts her death, and even on the page, her dying is a scene that is intimate, tender, and fully human. Mommy and Daddy haven't the wit to know what they've lost in her passing, but the spectators have heard Grandma's story and seen her impish delight in living despite her travails. It is *we* who will mourn her; it is *we* who have more work to do regarding our own fear of death. By observing Grandma's serenity at the end, we have a model that prepares us a little more for the losses that lie ahead. In writing *The Sandbox* with a score by William Flanagan (his then-companion), Albee has offered his Grandmother Cotter an elegy she is unlikely to have received from anyone else in her family. And he has placed at center stage the opportunity to be *present* to the dying moments of a loved one.

In this and in the other two plays in my study, Albee troubles our death-denying cultural agenda and its regular outcome: dying patients alone in a hospital room, attached not to another person but to a piece of medical equipment.³⁴ Instead, in *The Sandbox*, the playwright demonstrates how to embrace and be embraced by the act of dying. By the end of his long life, Albee had known loss well, starting with the death of Grandmother Cotter, the suicide of his mentor/lover William Flanagan, the loss of his longtime partner Jonathan Thomas whose dying he attended—and finally the death of his adoptive mother Frankie (whose dying he did not witness). When his partner of three decades succumbed to bladder cancer in 2005, Albee said, "One thing I learned is that grief is easily turned into self-pity. Yes, someone that you're with is fading, going out of focus. But, my God, if we ever lose sight of that fact that they have had the greater loss, then we're being selfish and indulgent."³⁵ He continued,

34 Matthew C. Roudané, "Death and Life: *All Over* and *Seascape*," in *Understanding Edward Albee* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 129. That's the scene Albee depicts in his play *All Over*, when, as Roudané tells us, "Albee deliberately hides the famous man behind a screen, the symbolic separator of the dying patients from the living family members. The screen represents, for Albee as for Kübler-Ross, a disturbing cultural distancing response, a way to deny an unpleasant reality."

35 Jesse Green, "Albee the Enigma, Now the Inescapable," in *The New York Times*, November 11, 2007. In the article, Albee says of the death of Thomas, "We had such a good, long relationship: nearly 35 years. That's a long time, a life in itself. Of course, that makes it worse,

“Mourning never ends; it just changes.”³⁶ There’s no doubt that the playwright learned from experience that to witness another’s “fading, going out of focus” is a painful privilege embroidered with gratitude for what was shared.³⁷

In *The Lady from Dubuque*, Albee creates a contrapuntal chorus of unheeded words and cries of pain and a *pas de deux* of denial brought to a close, once again, by a stranger’s embrace. That embrace helps to untie the knot of love and fear that binds a dying wife to a husband unwilling to let her go. Speaking with *New York Times* theatre critic Robert Berkvist before the opening of this play, Albee said, “*The Lady from Dubuque* began at least 10 or 12 years ago as an idea for a play to be called ‘The Substitute Speaker’.... Over the years, it mutated into its present form.”³⁸ The play’s lengthy gestation may have been fueled, in part, by the death of William Flanagan in 1969 as well as by the rising specter of the AIDS epidemic in creative communities over the next decade. Whatever the impetus, Albee found his way to the writing of Kübler-Ross and created her namesake character Elizabeth (also called “the Lady from Dubuque”) in the final version of his play. The biggest change the playwright made in the script from first to final drafts was to add direct address, he told Berkvist, in order to make the audience “co-conspirators.”³⁹

The show first opened on Broadway in 1980 and was “eviscerated by critics,” so it closed after twelve performances.⁴⁰ James Houghton, artistic director of the Signature Theatre, revived *The Lady from Dubuque* in 2012, saying, “Edward confronts audiences head-on with death here, in a way that may have been ahead of its time in 1980.”⁴¹ Indeed, in the play Jo is in her early thirties and is actively and painfully dying. Her attempts to speak about this are silenced by her husband Sam. Over the course of two days, he—and their houseguests—largely ignore the ravages of Jo’s illness. Early in Act One, during Sam’s game of Twenty Questions, Jo exhorts the others who are present, “The man has asked for silence; give it to him.”⁴² He repeatedly asks, “Who am I?” and she answers,

but at the same time, you can’t just say, ‘How dare you go away from me?’ ... There’s got to be a lot of ‘Thank you’ too. ‘Thank you for being alive and being with me for so long.’”

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Berkvist, “Albee Returns to the Living Room Wars,” D1.

39 Ibid.

40 Patrick Healy, “Albee Is Ready to Revisit His Past,” *New York Times* Theatre Review, 2 March 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/03/theater/the-playwright-and-a-revival-of-his-lady-from-dubuque.html>.

41 Ibid.

42 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee Volume 2 1966–1977* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2005), 561. All references to the play are from this edition.

"Your name's Sam, and this is your house, and I am your wife and I'm dying."⁴³ When he says, "Don't, Jo," she addresses the audience: "What can you do? He's a nice man."⁴⁴ Sam may be nice, but his state of denial invalidates the truth of Jo's experience, while their guests disavow the level of her physical distress. Sam needs the noise of a party game to avoid dealing with his wife's expressions of anger, pain, and fear, and she enables his behavior.

As with Grandma in *The Sandbox*, Jo turns to the audience members as listeners when it becomes clear that those onstage are deaf to her concerns. It annoys Sam that she does this, but before the play is over, he too, will address the audience. For now, though, he doesn't want Jo bringing strangers into the party game atmosphere he has created to wall off his pain. At the end of Twenty Questions, he is loath for Jo to reveal how she knew "who he was" in the game: Romulus *and* Remus, the twin founders of Rome. For Jo and Sam, this is a coded but intimate reference to his recent suckling of his wife's breasts, casting her in the role of the twin's wolf-mother. Since he draws his social sustenance from Jo, Sam hasn't a clue *who he is* without her. His lack of individuation from his mother-wife leaves him unable to imagine life in her absence.

Admittedly it is Sam's journey toward acceptance of Jo's dying (and his own mortality) that is the focus of the play, but it is Albee's portrayal of *her* mental, emotional, and physical processes that allows the audience to consider our own deeply entrenched impulse to turn away from death. Jo's succumbing is particularly painful to witness because she's young; it's a full moon, not a waning one that is disappearing from the sky. Shortly, talk of love play and wolf-mothers converge to reveal Jo's deepest wound: the fact that *her* mother is not there to ease her dying. The need for mothering pervades the play, and the Goddess of the Crossroads eventually heeds the call. With her mother absent during what Jo calls "THE HOUR OF MY GODDAMNED NEED," she soothes herself by popping an increasing number of pain pills and doing the instinctual work of the dying: beginning to loosen her ties to those she'll leave behind.⁴⁵

Unable to talk about her pain and, so, unable to manage her feelings, Jo relies on anger to push away those who will not let her disengage. The push-pull of Jo's moods is confounding for Sam, whose strategy is to hold on to her all the tighter. Poet Mary Oliver offers a path he would be wiser to follow:

To live in this world
you must be able

43 Ibid., 563.

44 Ibid., 563–564.

45 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, 571.

to do three things:
 to love what is mortal;
 to hold it
 against your bones knowing
 your own life depends on it
 and, when the time comes to let it go,
 to let it go.⁴⁶

But Sam is not ready to do that. Within earshot of his friend Edgar—and the audience—he admits that he knows Jo is dying, which creates in him an existential crisis. He says,

Each day, each night, each moment, she becomes less and less. My arms go around ... bone? She ... diminishes. She moves away from me in ways I ... The thing we must do about loss is, hold on to the object we're losing. There's time later for ... ourselves. Hold on! ... but to what? To bone? To air? To dust?⁴⁷

Here the stage directions indicate that Sam is speaking “To the audience/to himself/to anyone.”⁴⁸ In the midst of this confession, Edgar moves out of earshot and is replaced by Jo, who witnesses Sam’s subsequent weeping. Standing in the doorway, she makes no move to comfort him, speaking to him only when he is, as the stage directions note, “about done.”⁴⁹ Having enacted their estrangement in this way, she moves close enough to touch him and says, “Don’t cry ... if *you* cry, I will, *too*, and haven’t I enough? I mean, if I started crying for myself, what would hold me together?”⁵⁰ Having made this request, she “goes to him; strokes his hair,” as though he were a child; then she asks him to “Help me not to cry? Please?”⁵¹ Not yet resigned to an untimely death, Jo, too would banish grief from the house if she could. Since she can’t do that, she instructs her husband on how to ease her dying.

At this point in the scene, the stage directions indicate that Sam “buries his head in her crotch, his hands on her buttocks; he shakes his head slowly.”⁵²

46 Oliver, “In Blackwater Woods,” in *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 82–83.

47 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, 600.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

It is a wordless call for rebirth, a desire to return to the intimate shelter of the womb. But in the body of a dying woman, as Diana Hume George reminds us, “womb and tomb are ... equivalent.”⁵³ Since Sam can navigate neither a rebirth nor Jo’s path to oblivion, he insists, “everything is reversible.”⁵⁴ For Jo to believe that her condition is reversible is to ask her to unravel the shroud of understanding that she has woven around herself, to unlearn the knowledge that she is dying, that *she* is “about done.” Through his refusal to believe that she is close to death, Sam postpones his loss of identity as his wife’s child-protector. When Jo begins a loopy, drug-induced monologue, her husband reveals a lack of knowledge about the type or number of meds she’s taking.⁵⁵ This is indicative of the distance he has put between himself and the end stage of Jo’s illness.

The play is characterized, in part, by the stories that the couple *cannot* share verbally. But their inability to speak the truth is what makes their gestures and embraces so telling. Despite their verbal evasions and their shared longing for a different story—one of creation instead of termination—all the unspoken information is there within their body language. Albee choreographs a sometimes withholding, sometimes sexually steeped dance of intimacy and avoidance between husband and wife. Sam doesn’t move to comfort Jo when she is doubled up with pain, and she makes no move to staunch his weeping. He covers his ears and she uncovers them. She asks him for emotional distance and he buries his head in her crotch. When she insists on talking about her increasing pain, he “clasps his hand over her mouth, pulls her head to his body. She resists momentarily, then turns, puts her arms around his legs/hips. It is a reversal of the previous embrace.”⁵⁶ As metaphor or sexual practice, a woman’s face pressed against a man’s groin has no rebirthing associations. However pleasurable, fellatio is a reproductive dead-end. And that’s where Sam and Jo find themselves: at a dead-end. They follow this pretend *pas de deux* of sexual communion—for her pain has made intercourse impossible—with a playful arpeggio of cuddling, kissing, and giggling. But, when Sam gathers Jo up in his arms to carry her upstairs, her pain returns and “she grabs at the banister, leaves Sam’s arms.”⁵⁷ Through her anguished cries and crumpled form, and in his abortive efforts to carry and comfort her, they enact a choreography of loss, acknowledging what Sam can’t do for Jo and what Jo has to go through

53 George, “‘Who is the Double Ghost Whose Head is Smoke’: Women Poets on Aging,” in *Memory and Desire—Aging—Literature—Psychoanalysis*, ed. Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 138.

54 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, 603.

55 Ibid., 601–602.

56 Ibid., 604.

57 Ibid., 607.

by herself. In an ever more harrowing scene punctuated by her cries, he manages to get her on her feet and up to bed, but the two have shared their last embrace. Whatever comfort they found in touch or games or evasive action can no longer shield them from what's coming.

As the two disappear upstairs, Elizabeth, the mysterious Lady from Dubuque, and her companion Oscar enter, ready to offer Jo their services as travel guides to the Other Side. In his 1980 interview, Berkvist asked Albee if the Lady from Dubuque stands in for the Angel of Death. The playwright answered, "Angel of death? I'd hate to say that. We have whatever Jo needs.... The play is all about her moving into her own plane of reality so she can die."⁵⁸ What Jo needs is a mother to comfort her. What she gets is Hecate, Hell's best hospice nurse. The following morning, Sam discovers two strangers in his house and cannot make them leave. In this almost hallucinatory second act, Elizabeth makes herself at home in what Sam has called "a death house," with the fourth-wall-breaking rules of its world.⁵⁹ This should not be surprising, since Hecate has been a border-crosser for eons.

Though Sam resented the audience's presence in the first act, he is more than willing to ask their help in sorting out the identity of his unexpected houseguests. But like a cheerful, chthonic Mary Poppins, Elizabeth ignores his questions to get down to business. Including the audience in a recital of her credentials for the job at hand, she tells of her experience caring for an old woman. It is the first of three stories scattered throughout the act. Later, Elizabeth will recount her origins on a farm in the outskirts of Dubuque and also her dream of the end of the world. With her ability to see in all directions, Hecate parses everything from birth to death, start to finish.

Discerning Elizabeth's identity is the utmost question in Sam's mind until her debonair black companion enters and Sam finds himself outnumbered. Though Oscar calls Elizabeth "The Lady from Dubuque," in truth, she is the Dark Lady of Liminality, insisting, "I have come home for my daughter's dying."⁶⁰ Sam is prepared to defend the stairway to Jo's room against Elizabeth's approach, so she negotiates: "You'll bring her down.... I'll call off the dogs."⁶¹ Oscar—who acts as Elizabeth's enforcer—playfully objects to this terminology, but it's a chthonic in-joke. Dogs are sacred to Hecate and in some of the lore she herself is transformed into a Bitch. Sam doesn't have the benefit of Elizabeth's boundary-crossing view of the world. If he could see in three

58 Berkvist, "Albee Returns to the Living Room Wars," D1.

59 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, 599.

60 Ibid., 622.

61 Ibid., 624.

directions, perhaps he would be relieved to have Hospice Workers from Hades on hand for Jo's dying. When Sam's friends Lucinda and Edgar arrive, Elizabeth tells them, "I ... move about all the time."⁶² Indeed, in a mythic landscape that acknowledges no borders between this world and the other, her services as a Chthonic Coyote are needed everywhere. She brings an end to their questions by insisting, "there are things you would not be expected to understand."⁶³

Oscar's identity remains elusive throughout the play. As the only African American character, he is immediately marked and marginalized as other, but his actions take him to the center of the action. Our Lady of Women's Transitions comes to the house bearing a Gift: Jo's release. And Oscar's presence in service to the Gift-Giver smacks more than a little of the admittedly racist folkloric figure known as Black Peter. According to the medieval legend, Black Peter is a euphemism for the Devil. Enslaved by St. Nicholas who is working as God's operative, Black Peter is reduced to punishing children who misbehave, capturing them in a sack and beating them with a stick. At Sam and Jo's place, Oscar finds a houseful of errant children at his disposal and he particularly bedevils his host. This doubling of Oscar and a liberated Black Peter is driven home late in the act when Carol announces that she will untie the trussed-up Sam, and Oscar answers: "you open the package, you take the present."⁶⁴ But unlike St. Nicholas's enslaved underling, Oscar plays escort, grammarian, cultural critic—as well as bouncer—and he seems to take pleasure in his expanded responsibilities. In support of the Dark Moon Lady's midwifery of death, Oscar functions as a willing, if over-qualified, orderly.

During Sam's second act struggle with Elizabeth and Oscar, it is now *his* lived experience that is repeatedly denied. The partygoers return, and most of them accept Elizabeth's claim that she is Jo's mother despite Sam's disavowal of her. When Jo comes downstairs, she is hurting and hungry for the kind of embrace Elizabeth offers—arms that will hold her and at the same time allow her to slip away. As Toby Zinman suggests, the dying woman's need for mothering has conjured the mother she sought.⁶⁵ When they meet, Jo surrenders herself to the Crossroads Goddess. The stage directions read, "their embrace is almost a tableau, so involved is it with pressing together."⁶⁶ Like birthing, dying brings on an altered state of consciousness. Jo sees Oscar outfitted in Sam's nightdress and can no longer tell the difference between the two because she

62 Ibid., 626.

63 Ibid., 628.

64 Ibid., 563.

65 Tony Zinman, *Edward Albee* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 100.

66 Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque*, 639.

has let go of her earthly entanglements. Death is a door that opens to us so that we may pass through it, each in our time. Sam sees at last that Jo has one foot over the threshold and that her pain has subsided. Elizabeth steps away from her and he rushes to Jo, shaking her awake and demanding to know, "Is this what you want?"⁶⁷

From this point forward, Sam's efforts to keep Jo alive for his own survival are futile. He tries to attack Elizabeth, but Oscar subdues him. He is tied up by his friends, who deny him one by one. After the other guests have gone, Carol lingers to untie Sam. He asks her to stay, and she wonders, "What do you want me to do?"⁶⁸ Sam, described in the stage directions as "(Lost little boy)" begs her, "Make Jo better? Make them leave?"⁶⁹ Carol tells him, "Jo thinks she's better. They make her think so." When he asks, "Is that what matters?" she answers, "Ask Jo."⁷⁰ But he wants more from Carol, a confirmation that the Lady is not Jo's mother. Carol is noncommittal, telling him and the audience "Who's to say?"⁷¹ Having earned Sam's respect—as well as Elizabeth's and Oscar's and ours—Carol exits.⁷² He's alone now with Jo and those who've come to take her Home.

In the Lady's arms, Jo has become nearly comatose, though she rallies to ask Sam to let her go. Her detachment from him is necessary for the completion of her journey, though Sam feels that her going will erase him. Oscar carries Jo upstairs and returns to inform Elizabeth that their job is done. With assistance from the Midwife of Death and her companion, Jo has crossed over. Her suffering and story are done. With his wife no longer standing in the doorway between him and eternity, it is Sam's own death that concerns him now. He asks for repeated assurances that death, when it comes, comes too swiftly to hurt or to give the dying time to be afraid.⁷³ Now it is he who needs comfort care to keep on living.

Sam wonders aloud once more exactly who Elizabeth is. The playwright has archly named her "The Lady from Dubuque," which happens to be a city lying at the *crossroads* of three states. But Hecate's Crossroad is a mythic one, linking this side and the Other. Answering Sam still obliquely, Elizabeth says, "I thought you knew," then closes the play by addressing the audience: "I thought he knew."⁷⁴

67 Ibid., 664.

68 Ibid., 663.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 667.

74 Ibid., 669.

Here she is asking if we are willing to acknowledge what Sam cannot: that death is with us always. Miller writes, "If Sam, the surrogate figure of the audience here, remains in the dark, Albee wants us to see.... The play should, in fact, be read as an elaborate theatrical game with the audience as participant. In thus addressing the final word to the audience, Albee expands his universe beyond the play and the stage, towards us."⁷⁵ We have followed Sam and Jo through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Zinman names the play for what it is, an outright "demonstration of Kübler-Ross' 'stages of dying,'" that is, theatrical thanatology at its best.⁷⁶ Sam's *pas de deux* with Jo is over. Perhaps Carol will be his next partner on the existential dance floor, but not yet. Still, Sam has witnessed the steps he'll be taking himself one day, so now he has body-memory of it. So have we.

Three Tall Women is another of what Brenda Murphy calls Albee's threnodies, or songs of lamentation.⁷⁷ It was written in the years just following the death of the playwright's adoptive mother, Frances Cotter Albee. His real-life, uneasy truce with her after two decades of estrangement laid the groundwork for this remarkable investigation of aging and surcease. In a 2004 profile of the playwright, the *Guardian* states, "*Three Tall Women*, essentially a factual biography of his mother, is the most deeply personal of [Albee's] plays. It is a portrait and exploration of everything he has always defined himself against, and thus in some ways an inverted autobiography; in the final act he himself appears as a returned prodigal, a silent presence watching over her death bed."⁷⁸ John Lahr points out, "Far from being an act of revenge or special pleading, the play is a wary act of reconciliation, whose pathos and poetry are a testament to the bond, however attenuated, between child and parent."⁷⁹ He goes on to say that the script "bears witness to the son's sad wish to be loved."⁸⁰ Murphy notes that here Albee moves the survivor's process of learning-to-let-go to the periphery—and places the consciousness of the dying person at center stage.⁸¹ The playwright does this using a similar structure to the one he used in *The Lady from Dubuque*—a realistic first act followed by a surreal second.

75 Miller, "Albee on Death and Dying," 160.

76 Zinman, *Edward Albee*, 102.

77 Brenda Murphy, "Albee's Threnodies: *Box-Mao-Box*, *All Over*, *The Lady from Dubuque*, and *Three Tall Women*," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 91.

78 Aida Edemariam, "Whistling in the Dark," *Guardian*, 10 January, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/jan/10/theatre>.

79 Lahr, "Sons and Mothers," Review of *Three Tall Women* in *New Yorker*, May 16, 1994, 102.

80 Ibid.

81 Murphy, "Albee's Threnodies," 105.

Shortly after the lights come up in Act One, Albee introduces A, B and C, embodying three generations of womanhood. That in itself is enough to call Hecate forth. But the Goddess waits in the wings until she can be fully realized with a trio of entrances at the top of the second act. August W. Staub recognizes this, calling the play “an ancient work, for it clearly invokes one of humanity’s oldest myths, that of the triple goddess.”⁸² The second act device of tripling the main character is an effective one, capturing what Herbert Blau calls “the overlaid and successive selves which constitute a life.”⁸³ In the first act, A is a woman in her nineties, much removed from what had been a ferocious grasp on life, diminished by dementia and a failing body. Nevertheless, she manages to relate “a discontinuous narrative of broken memories.”⁸⁴ Through these snippets of stories, *her* life flashes before *our* eyes, evoking Hecate’s triune phases: the canny daughter of an ambitious mother; a randy, rich man’s wife who endures his betrayals and nurses him through a final illness; and, finally, an ancient survivor of great tenacity, the last of her dwindling social circle. As audience members, we may be initially disgusted by A’s demented self-involvement, the imagined stink of her infirmity, and her pungent prejudices. But through her narrative, she wins our grudging respect. Her soliloquies remind us that taking the measure of one’s life is part of the purposeful business of dying.

Throughout the play, A’s bed claims pride of place at upstage center, for her whole world is bordered by her bedroom and an offstage bath. As long as anyone is in her company—the audience included—we are confined to that same space. When we first meet them, all three of the characters are seated nearby the bed. From her armchair, the imperious A is attended by B, a middle-aged caregiver who observes the messy and complicated process of her charge’s decrepitude with a clear eye. Of B’s character, Marian Faux observes, “In our ageist society, where a woman’s power is widely viewed as declining in direct proportion to her age (and diminishing beauty), [Albee] introduces a novel idea, namely, that age fifty can be as satisfying to a woman as a man.”⁸⁵ C is a twenty-something representative from the lawyer’s office, who’s been sent to tidy A’s affairs. She is flummoxed by the old woman’s refusal to hand over the control of her dwindling estate, and she has no patience for A’s litany of

82 Staub, “Public and Private Thought: The Enthymeme of Death in Albee’s *Three Tall Women*,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 153.

83 Herbert Blau, “The Makeup of Memory in the Winter of Our Discontent,” in Woodward and Schwartz, *Memory and Desire*, 14.

84 Ramón Espejo Romero, “Edward Albee’s *Three Tall Women* and Its Existential Background,” in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 10 (2004): 86.

85 Faux, Review of *Three Tall Women*, dir. Lawrence Sacharow, in *Theatre Journal* 46, no. 4 (Dec., 1994): 542, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3209076>.

long-ago-learned bigotry. With some distaste, she witnesses B attending to the bodily needs of a crone who still rallies with bouts of lucidity, paranoia, and humor. C is too young to be able to “project” herself into A’s situation and to achieve much in the way of empathy. B’s perspective at midlife allows her to be less judgmental when listening to A’s oral histories. And she is the mouthpiece for Albee’s convictions: “You take the breath in ... you let it out. The first one you take in you’re upside down and they slap you into it. The last one ... well, the last one you let it all out ... and that’s it. You start ... and then you stop.... I’d like to see children learn it—have a six-year-old say, ‘I’m dying’ and know what it means.”⁸⁶ C recoils at this, but B insists, “Start in young, make ’em aware they’ve got only a little time. Make ’em aware that they’re dying from the minute they’re alive.”⁸⁷

The stage directions are minimal in this first act, partly because a largely sedentary A holds B and C prisoner to her needs. She performs her helplessness with bouts of weeping and, just as Jo did with Sam, the others simply let her weep. There’s a walker nearby, but she refuses to use it. Thus, she cannot move from her place without assistance, keeping the others captive with her rambling stories until she must be helped to the toilet. In A’s absence, B and C talk about her bodily functions and breath, as if they were her only actions. Though able-bodied, they cannot leave A’s side because her immobility rules their comings and goings. B is used to this, but C cannot abide the sight and smell of A’s fragility. When the old woman returns from the toilet, she “wobbles” but stubbornly flails an arm to warn help away.⁸⁸ Hers is a dance of dependence, badly partnered by pride.

Within this confined space, there are intimate territorial disputes between the old woman and the young one. C doesn’t know the geography of her employer’s ever-diminishing world; thus, she trespasses in it by sitting in A’s vacated chair. Returning to find C in her seat, the crone demands to know what’s become of her chair. With A ensconced in it once more, C doesn’t know which pillows to offer the old woman, momentarily rendering C as helpless as her employer. But B knows this territory well, soothing her charge and drawing out a story. A’s tales are full of action, but she is reduced to the occasional gesture, touching her hair or shoulder, or smashing a water glass to remind herself that she has agency. Returned to the throne of her bed, A is felled by a stroke. Apparently, what Blau calls “the variousness of cast-off roles” has taken its toll,

86 Albee, *Three Tall Women*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee Volume 3 1978–2003* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2005), 317–318. All references to the play are to this edition.

87 Ibid., 318.

88 Ibid., 318–319.

for reliving past betrayals that continue to plague us can have somatic consequences.⁸⁹ C exits to call the woman's son, and B exits to call the doctor, leaving A alone, helpless, and still as the act ends. Following the intermission, A's liminal state will allow Hecate to claim the stage as a multiplicity of narrators. In visual representations, the Crossroads Goddess is shown with three faces; she may also be depicted with one body—or three. In the second act of Albee's play, Hecate appears fully trifurcated as three, tall women. But when her trio of faces look one another in the eye, they do not always like what they see.

The lights come up on Act Two, revealing an inert figure, "A," on the bed. B and C enter to assess her condition. With the patient completely disabled, the others are free to own the space, and B does, "wandering about, touching things."⁹⁰ The strangeness of this familiar space is confirmed when the actor playing A enters and says: "Any change?"⁹¹ B answers, "No, we're ... just as we were, no change."⁹² Where are we exactly? In the landscape of A's fragmented mind and memory. Within this landscape, the three actors all play different-aged versions of A, embodying Hecate's triple aspect in her most fully realized Albeean incarnation. However, in her trifurcated human forms, the Goddess is no longer all-knowing; each piece of her owns only *her* part of the life story she is living, has lived, will live. Their stories must be shared to allow the three to consider—or re-consider—the narrative that is ahead of or behind them. And having been confined behind a fourth wall in the first act, the women now have the freedom to address the audience when they need listeners who aren't personally tied to the stories they tell.

The ingénue (for she is no maiden), C recounts her experience as a professional mannequin in "the fanciest shop in town," with A and B as her personal Greek chorus, sashaying, twirling, imitating, and applauding her.⁹³ When the asides of her sister-selves begin to darken with the knowledge they hold but she does not, C seeks a less biased audience for her storytelling among the theatre-goers. Her innocence is increasingly tarnished by the stories A and B insist on telling her. Though they are a newly pledged sorority of three, they cannot help but bedevil one another with what they know or don't know or don't want to know about their lived experiences. Before they are done, the trio takes turns denying one another—as well as their estranged son who has arrived to hold a vigil at his ailing mother's bedside.⁹⁴

89 Herbert Blau, "The Makeup of Memory," 14.

90 Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 352.

91 *Ibid.*, 354.

92 *Ibid.*

93 *Ibid.*, 356.

94 *Ibid.*, 382.

Seemingly conjured by their first mention of him, the son is represented here as the young man he was when he fled his parents' house—rather than as the middle-aged man he would have been at the time of A's final illness. Of him, Zinman writes, "this is the boy his mother remembers when he left ... an imagining of his mother's dying mind ... as she, in effect, forces the young man to act out the grief she longs to make him feel."⁹⁵ Each of the three tall women has a different reaction to his appearance at *their* bedside and the audience is witness to the differing voices in a performed inner monologue. B's fury at her son—both for being gay and for walking out on his parents—is still fresh. She sneers and screams in his face "Get out ... !" At this point, he isn't aware of anyone but the figure on the bed, and so doesn't react.⁹⁶ C is curious about the child she will adopt, moving toward him and wondering aloud, "Is that him?... How nice; how handsome ... ," but he cannot see her either.⁹⁷ A, who has lived into a period of détente with her son, tells B, "Do be quiet," and instructs C, "Let him alone; he's come to see me."⁹⁸ And he has, for the stage directions read, "He goes to 'A' [on the bed], sits on a chair left of her, takes her left arm; his shoulders shake; he puts his forehead to her arm, or it to his forehead, becomes still."⁹⁹ Observing this, A says, "That's it; do your duty."¹⁰⁰ B is eager to besmirch C's dewy assessment of her someday-son with the news that he is a homosexual, but A shushes her, saying, "Shhhhhh. I don't want to think about *that*. He came back; he never loved me, he never loved us, but he came back. Let him alone."¹⁰¹ B is startled to learn of her reunion with her son, since it's still two decades away, swearing, "I'll *never* forgive him."¹⁰² A replies, "No; I never do. But we play the game."¹⁰³ When B, the enraged mother-self, insists that she never wants to see her son again, the crone counsels her, "Well, yes you *do*, you see. You *do* want to see him again. Wait twenty years.... We never forgive him. We let him come, but we never forgive him"; then she turns to the young man by the bed and says, "I bet you don't know *that* ... do you!"¹⁰⁴ Appalled by the rage and the lack of forgiveness in her older selves, C demands to know what so changes in her still girlish life that she could one day become B and A.

95 Zinman, *Edward Albee*, 124.

96 Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 369.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 370.

102 Ibid., 371.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

Her other incarnations supply stories that fill in the gaps in her knowledge. What she hears makes C admit she dislikes what she will become. It's as intriguing to this writer as it may have been to A's youngest incarnation that the three aspects of herself are not always in concert; it will take further talking, further listening, further understanding to bring the various parts of herself back into harmony.

But A turns her attention to her son once more, this time with foreknowledge from the Other Side. She "moves to the bed, sits on it, opposite from him. A speaks directly to him; now he can hear her, can respond."¹⁰⁵ His response to her words is physical: a hand up (perhaps to defend against her verbal blows), a reach to touch her, to comfort her—for, she feels, he left her to die in a hospital when she should have remained at home. Further, the crone says, when he arrived too late to bear witness to her passing, he "performed" a sense of grief he did not feel for the benefit of the maid and butler who were sitting in the room with the old woman's body.¹⁰⁶ Biographer Mel Gussow reveals that the described deathbed scene in the hospital was directly from life.¹⁰⁷ In the face of A's harangue from the Hereafter, her son shudders and weeps. Indeed, Hecate is at her most hellish with him.

When she moves away from the bed at the end of her tirade, A faces a reckoning with her other selves. C says to her "I ... will ... not ... become ... you. I will not. I deny you."¹⁰⁸ But anger and denial are not the last stops on C's journey. She has traveled from innocence to loss—having learned of the coming deaths of her parents, her marriage to an unfaithful man, her estrangement from her only child, her turn to bitterness as B and decrepitude as A—and she's ready to bargain: "I know my best times ... happiest?—haven't happened yet. They're to *come*. Aren't they? Please? And ... and whatever evil comes, whatever loss and taking away comes, won't it all be balanced out. Please?"¹⁰⁹ B offers what consolation she can from her particular perspective: "The happiest time? ... Standing up here right on top of the middle of it has to be the happiest time. I mean, it's the only time you get a three-hundred and sixty-degree view—see in all directions."¹¹⁰ But she can't see in all directions: her view is so blinkered by her present-day rage against her son that she never acknowledges the audience on the Other Side of the curtain. However, A, who has lived past estrangement into the unforgiving, but functional *détente* of a re-established relationship

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 381.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*, 356.

¹⁰⁸ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 382.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 383.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

with her son, knows much that the others can only guess. Shaking her head at the thought that youth or midlife is the happiest vantage point for assessing one's journey, A goes to center to speak to the audience and assure all of us that "coming to the end of it" is the best part of life.¹¹¹

The three tall women regain their triune sisterhood when A "looks to C and B, puts her hands out, takes theirs" and says, "That's the happiest moment ... when it's all done. When we stop. When we can stop."¹¹² A accepts death itself; by the end of the act, she speaks of herself in the third person, indicating "her growing sensation of detachment from [her] body."¹¹³ Indeed, she names the happiest moment of life—beyond the illusions of youth, the disappointments of midlife, and the indignity of old age—when one moves from "knowing you will die" to "*knowing* you will die."¹¹⁴ For A, *knowing* there's an end is a liberating realization that can inform a lifetime, if one lets it. Joining hands with B and C, she re-integrates all of her triple aspects as she steps toward the Great Mystery and speaks directly to the audience. Whatever her previous wounds and woundings, her final words are encouraging, gentle, almost kind: "I was talking about ... what? Coming to the end of it; yes. So. There it is. You asked after all. That's the happiest moment ... When it's all done. When we stop. When we can stop."¹¹⁵ A welcomes death, not as yet another betrayal in life, but as a hard-won victory, a haven, and a relief. It is an act of generosity to share this knowledge with her sister-selves, and the audience as well, for A knows the Way Out and we don't.

Rachel Killick comments on the playwright's "choice ... of a female protagonist to represent the processes of ageing and dying," noting that Albee as a male writer has chosen to situate "the unpalatable truths of ageing and death ... as the experience not of self, but of the Other."¹¹⁶ Indeed, he dedicated himself to giving women a substantial voice in his canon, even though that voice could sometimes cut to the bone. In contemplating his adoptive mother through the story-lens of this play, says Marian Faux, Albee "appears to have come to terms with their relationship ... and even manages to be quite generous toward [her].... While making the point that this is a world where all women are kept in one way or another, he still manages to see what it took for

111 Ibid., 384.

112 Ibid.

113 Luere, "Objectivity in the Growth of a Pulitzer: Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 10.

114 Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 384.

115 Ibid.

116 Killick, "Staging Memory, Staging Death: Michel Tremblay's *Albertine, en cinq temp* and Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*," *Essays in Theatre/Études Théâtrales* 19, no. 2 (2001): 104.

her to survive.”¹¹⁷ But survival—especially into one’s nineties—has a cost. Blau calls it “the scandal of aging.”¹¹⁸

The play may end with a hand-in-hand psychic reintegration of the aged A with her abler-bodied and younger selves, but the text also casts a long and lingering look at the physical and mental indignities that often accompany advanced years. By bringing A’s various infirmities within our gaze, the playwright insists that we look at what’s behind the impulse to render age (as well as death) invisible in America. Kathleen Woodward believes that “the denial of old age—characterizes our culture as a whole.”¹¹⁹ She writes, “Our disregard of age is all the more curious because age ... is the one difference we are all likely to live into.”¹²⁰ And apparently, it isn’t only Americans who would turn their eyes away from the dissolution that comes with age. Killick references a review of the first London performance of the show in 1994, saying, “as Westerners we tend to share ... the delusion, so ruthlessly demolished by Albee, that in a society where everything can be bought, decay and death are somehow optional.”¹²¹ But death and decay are not optional. And we have much to learn by sitting at the bedside of a dying woman, and, as Killick suggests, letting the soon-to-be corpse “have the last word.”¹²²

Albee-as-innovator was always intent on asking his audiences to *look at* what we might be inclined to *look away from*, whether we like it or not. Writing for “The Albee Issue” of *The Dramatist*, Tina Howe notes, “[His] penchant for leading us into the mystery of it all remains unparalleled in the American theatre—for its grace, imagination and yes ... truth.”¹²³ In these three works of theatrical thanatology, Albee leads us into the Great Mystery: he stages dying so that we may witness it in the theatre, if nowhere else. And with the help of the Triple Goddess, he models performed palliative care—offering the dying a chance to tell their stories or to be silent, to be heard, and to be held, to disconnect from the cares of others and to connect with their own evolving identities and lived experience. If we choose, we who are witnesses to these characters’ journeys may carry that knowledge back into our own lives

117 Faux, Review of *Three Tall Women*, directed by Lawrence Sacharo. *Theatre Journal* 46, no. 4 (Dec., 1994): 542.

118 Blau, “The Makeup of Memory,” 29.

119 Woodward, ed., Introduction, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), x–xi.

120 Ibid.

121 Killick, “Staging Memory, Staging Death,” 105.

122 Ibid., 106.

123 Howe, “The American Dream—Won’t you take your dress off?,” *The Dramatist/The Albee Issue* (Sept/Oct 2017): 14.

and to our own life's end. Drawing on lessons he learned from his own losses, storytelling strategies he learned from the Greeks, the spoken and gestural dialogue of his characters, and references to the Triple Goddess, Albee invites us to awaken to our own mortality, hands us numerous roadmaps to Hecate's underworld realm, and urges us to walk the road to oblivion with our eyes wide open.

The Glee of Vulnerability: Becoming Kin with Edward Albee's *Goat*

Parisa Shams

Abstract

Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* blurs the boundaries between human and animal to unveil the transgressive impulses and perplexing emotions that define and disrupt our most intimate bonds. Albee substitutes the human with an anthropomorphized animal at the center of an epiphanic recognition scene where the human forms a queer kinship with the animal, thus breaking ties with his human kin. How do the human and animal become kin whilst the bonds of kinship between humans break apart? What subjects the animal to bodily harm in the hands of humans blinded by passion, rage, and grief? Albee's turbulent tale of love and loss provides us with a context to think about the interplay of kinship and the ethics of vulnerability and violence. Here, Albee's unsettling provocation of conventions of the tragic genre is put into dialogue with Judith Butler's ethics of vulnerability and her reading of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy of the face.

In general, humanity as a species feels an extraordinary revulsion from everything that might remind it of its own animal nature, a revulsion which I strongly suspect to be deeply related to the persistence of its very real animality.¹

THEODOR ADORNO

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1 Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 206.

Kinship relations are articulated not only in the breach wrought by passion, but also in the guilt and sorrow that follows.²

JUDITH BUTLER



Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes Towards a Definition of Tragedy*) subverts the tragic genre to bring the animal other into the realm of recognition and unveil the transgressive impulses that define and disrupt our most intimate ties.³ Martin, a successful, loving husband who is shamed by his male friends for being monogamous ends up having an affair with a goat that he anthropomorphizes as Sylvia.⁴ While everyone is shocked by what they see as bestiality, Martin perceives it as a mutual love, the same and as equal to the love he feels for Stevie, his wife. Upon discovering the truth, Stevie, who admits to her profound love for Martin, voices the possibilities of killing him,⁵ for he has "broken something and it can't be fixed."⁶ Complicating the play's ethical dilemmas, the couple's homosexual son, Billy, in a moment of grave emotional distress over what has happened between his parents, gives Martin a sexual kiss on the mouth, which he ruefully regrets: "... It clicked over, and you were just another ... another man. I get confused ... sex and love; love and"⁷ Stevie ends up slaughtering the goat, coldly dragging its body to a sobbing Martin: "She loved you ... you say. As much as *I* do," leaving the audience potentially pondering who is the "animal": Stevie, the killer, or Sylvia, the one who is killed?⁸

The Goat is a complicated play covering a wide range of topics from animal subjectivity, sexuality, marriage and family life, to love, morality, alienation

2 Butler, "Kinship Trouble in *The Bacchae*" (UCL Houseman Lecture 2017, University College of London, Feb 8, 2017). The text of the lecture has recently been published by UCL Department of Greek and Latin under the title, "Breaks in the Bond: Reflections on Kinship Trouble."

3 Albee, *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy*), in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee*, Volume 3 (New York, Woodstock, and London: Overlook Duckworth, 2005). Further references are to this edition.

4 That Martin is shamed for being loyal to his wife can be seen where he recalls his friends' remarks: "What's the matter with you, Martin!? You mean you're only doing it with your wife!? What kind of man *are* you?!" (593).

5 Addressing Martin, Stevie makes remarks such as, "If I'm going to kill you I need to know exactly why" (582), and "I think we've hit upon why I'm going to kill you" (592). She also threatens to bring him down: "I'll bring you down with me!" (605).

6 Albee, *The Goat*, 604.

7 Ibid., 616.

8 Ibid., 622.

and belonging, and the ambivalent relationship among human, nature, and civilization. In terms of genre, too, the play has provoked a range of scholarly responses, interpreting the play as both tragedy and black comedy, or locating it in relation to the pastoral tradition.⁹

The Goat stages the ethical conflict that arises from a pastoral encounter between human and (its) animal other, resolving in violent chaos. An anthropomorphized animal replaces the human as the tragic hero falls in love with a goat, and the pathos is brought about by the death not of a human being but of an animal involved in a bestial relationship, the result being a perplexing drama of human-human and animal-human relations. The play is thus innovative both in its treatment of the conventions of the tragic and in its presentation of boundary-crossing and inter-subjectivity through a human-animal-human crisis that brings kinship bonds into play with the ethics of alterity (otherness),¹⁰ loss, and vulnerability.¹¹ Focusing on the interplay of kinship and the ethics of vulnerability and violence, this analysis will address the questions of how Martin and Sylvia the goat become kin while the bond of kinship between Martin and Stevie breaks apart, and why Sylvia is subjected to bodily harm, culminating in her slaughter in the hands of an enraged and grieving Stevie. To this end, I will locate Judith Butler's account of relational vulnerability and her reading of Levinas' ethical philosophy of the face in relation to Albee's subversive invocation of the tragic genre.

Why would *The Goat* be a play about kinship? If *The Goat* is a tragedy, then, as Butler holds, it "allows us to think about the laws of kinship or the norms

9 For a comprehensive study of the pastoral as a fundamental element in the play, see Tony Jason Stafford, "Edward Albee and the Pastoral Tradition," in *Edward Albee and Absurdism*, ed. Michael Y. Bennet (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 95–110. Some studies that raise speculation about the play's connection with tragedy and tragicomedy are Boroka Prohaszka Rad, "Transgressing the Limits of Interpretation: Edward Albee's *The Goat*, or *Who Is Sylvia?* (Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy)," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 15, no. 1 (2009): 135–153; J. Ellen Gainor, "Albee's *The Goat*: Rethinking Tragedy for the 21st Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen J. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 199–216; John Kuhn, "Getting Albee's Goat: 'Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy,'" *American Drama* 13, no. 2 (2004): 1–32; Una Chaudhuri, "(De) Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance," *Drama Review* 51, no. 1 (2007): 8–20.

10 Alterity—the encounter with and the relation to the other—is a question of contemporary philosophy, and Emmanuel Levinas is a philosopher most known for his reflections on the ethics of alterity.

11 What I take from Butler is a sense of a vulnerability to the other, to their address, to injury and destruction, which is inherent in social existence and constitutes our responsibility for the other. Responsibility, within this context, is not understood in its classical juridical sense of holding one accountable for their actions. Rather, it is about responding to the other and arises from the recognition of their existence.

that govern its practice.”¹² The play’s title invokes the tragic genre both in its use of the word “goat” and in the subtitle, “Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy.”¹³ Una Chaudhuri writes that Albee invokes the elements of tragic structure by including a hero (Martin) at the crest of his life, on the verge of a fall, and it is the presence of Sylvia, the goat, that destabilizes and subverts the conventions of the tragic genre.¹⁴ Martin’s encounter with the goat provides a context to think about the moment of becoming kin and the transgressive impulses that cause misrecognition and disrupt kin relations. Albee has said much about his troubled relationship with his adoptive parents, which could be a reason why he would be interested in writing a play featuring kinship trouble. Prophecy Coles claims that Albee has said all his plays are about finding his lost family and that his wish is “to make known that all his plays are about a search for his family and the nature of true love.”¹⁵ Taking this as the background myth at work in *The Goat*, Coles reads the play as a reworking of the Oedipal tragedy of adoption and sees lying behind the play’s image of bestiality poignant fantasies of “adoption, incest, homosexuality, and sexual identity,” linking back to the Oedipus myth.¹⁶ The fact that Martin falls in love with a goat and that his son is called Billy, Coles contends, raises the possibility that Albee is addressing

12 Butler, “Kinship Trouble.”

13 The word “goat” could reference tragedy as a “goat-song.” As Brett M. Rogers (2007) explains, the word tragedy derives from the Greek word *tragoidia*, meaning “goat-song.” There is no decisive explanation for what goat-song stands for. It has been suggested that tragedies were performed in connection with a ritual that involved goat sacrifice. It has also been suggested that *tragoidia* implies a connection between the god Dionysus and his goat-like followers, the satyrs, who were known for drunken and libidinous behavior. Therefore, on the one hand, the festival of Dionysus is said to have included a goat sacrifice, and on the other hand, Dionysus was associated with mythical creatures that were half-men and half-goats, and tragedies were performed with a concluding satyr-drama. Thus, the connection between Dionysus, tragedy, and goat is reinforced (12). Scott Scullion argues that there is abundant evidence for tragedy meaning song for the goat prize. See Rogers, “Classic Greek and Roman Drama,” in *Western Drama Through the Ages: Four Great Eras of Western Drama*, ed. Kimball King (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 3–29; Scullion, “Tragedy and Religion,” in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 29.

Note that Albee’s play might imply this connection among Dionysus, tragedy, and the goat in that Martin’s instinctual passion for the goat can connect him with the Dionysian spirit as it is suggestive of a reconciliation with nature that is evident through Martin’s descriptive details of the natural surroundings in his encounter with the animal. Albee’s use of “goat” then appears to set up a parodic element in that it both invokes tragedy and subverts its conventions.

14 Chaudhuri, “(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance,” *Drama Review* 51, no. 1 (2007): 11.

15 Coles, *The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past: An Exploration of the Unconscious Transmission of Trauma across Generations* (London: Karnac, 2011), 21.

16 *Ibid.*, 20.

issues concerning sexual identity between fathers and sons.¹⁷ However, without tracing biographical evidence, the play would still have a lot to say about the confusion that surrounds relationships and intimate ties.

In an interview with Albee, Steven Drukman notes that the playwright considers *The Goat* as his “most overtly political play.”¹⁸ Albee admits, “It’s about the limits of our tolerance” and relates to “what we may permit ourselves to think about, and I consider that to be political.”¹⁹ If *The Goat* is a political play and Martin’s problem is one concerning kinship, then it is not irrelevant to the politics of kinship Butler has explored in her monographs *Antigone’s Claim*, *Undoing Gender*, and *Precarious Life*. Butler’s politics of kinship reconceives our most intimate ties by focusing on the figure of Antigone from Sophocles’ plays. Albee’s dramatic redefinition of tragedy is not dissimilar to Sophocles’ political reflections on disruptive kinship in *Antigone* and in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Martin’s love for a goat, like Antigone’s commitment to her brother, is not a politically survivable act, and similar to Antigone, Martin is to face a tragic fate. This tragic fate “is the fate of any and all who would transgress the lines of kinship that confer intelligibility on culture.”²⁰ Antigone defies the law of the state—which is defined by her uncle—in the name of an ethical obligation to another kin that is her brother. Martin fouls up his relationship to his wife as he transgresses cultural norms and taboos by assuming a forbidden connection with a goat. This goat-loving man who evasively admits to have gotten an erection due to the sensation of his toddler son on his lap, like Butler’s Antigone, upsets “the vocabulary of kinship that is the precondition of the human.”²¹

The play, then, portrays a plethora of confusion around intimate ties: Martin extends his love for his wife to a goat, Stevie threatens to bring down her beloved husband, and Billy gives a sensual kiss to his father. What is this kinship that can become so troubled? In her 2017 UCL Housman Lecture, “Kinship Trouble in *The Bacchae*,” Butler presents a discussion around how kinship works and what breaks its bonds. In this lecture, Butler broadly defines kinship as “a set of relations” proving “to be binding and recognizable, organizing fundamental relations of dependency pertaining to life and death in time and space.”²² She contends that confusion, alienation, and misrecognition are indispensable to kin relations. Recognition, she argues, “falters in the midst of kinship,”

17 Ibid., 21.

18 Drukman, “Edward Albee: Who’s Afraid of Controversy? Not This Playwright,” *Interview Magazine*, October 17, 2012, accessed July 2017, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/new-again-edward-albee>.

19 Albee, quoted in Ibid.

20 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 72.

21 Ibid., 82.

22 Butler, “Kinship Trouble.”

which is “by definition, dependent on the possibility of disruption understood as relationships that are invariably marked or halted by the possibility of failing.”²³ She draws attention to the fact that neither all kin relations are human nor all human bonds kin relations, and thus we need to define cross-species relations and broader modes of belonging. By exploring the relations of disrupted kinship in Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae*, she draws attention to the overlap between the categories of the divine, human, and animal, and asks, “Is the human not always a human animal?” This seems to be one of the many themes Albee also brings up in his complicated account of relation and responsibility that blurs the boundaries of the real and surreal:

STEVIE: ... It is about you being an animal!

MARTIN: I thought I was.

STEVIE: Hunh!

MARTIN: I thought I was; I thought we *all* were ... animals.²⁴

The theme of human animality was brought up by Albee in the very beginning of his dramatic career, when his landmark one-act play *The Zoo Story* (1958) established him as a playwright. Peter, the protagonist in *The Zoo Story*, is liberated by Jerry from his vegetable life to be awakened into his animality: “you’re not really a vegetable; it’s all right, you’re an animal. You’re an animal, too.”²⁵ Jerry’s statement seems to imply that the invocation of animality (and getting in touch with one’s animal self) is what pushes the human out of his comfort zone and into an elevated level of consciousness. Jerry’s own awakening is also revealed to have been hastened by a troubling encounter with a dog with whom he endeavors so hard—but fails—to communicate.²⁶ In *Seascape* (1975), a retired couple intrigued by the question of change and the fear of passivity, alienation, stagnation, and death—or becoming “a vegetable,” to quote the female character Nancy—confront two enormous, speaking lizards who have outgrown their underwater world and left home because they “had a sense of not belonging anymore.”²⁷ Questioning the distinction between

23 Ibid.

24 Albee, *The Goat*, 602.

25 Albee, *At Home at the Zoo* (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth, 2008), 94.

26 In *The Zoo Story*, the story of Jerry and the dog serves as a microcosm of human relations in general, and a metaphorical parallel to the relationship between Peter and Jerry in particular. Along the same lines, Tobias’ recollection of his relationship with his cat in *A Delicate Balance* (1966) serves as a metaphor for his relationship with his wife. Albee’s use of animal imagery plays with the ideas of the animal self and the intermingling of the human and animal nature.

27 Albee, *Seascape*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee*, Volume 3 (New York, Woodstock, and London: Overlook Duckworth, 2005), 390, 436.

humans and the “brute beast,” this surrealistic encounter between human and animal reveals the inevitability of loss, suffering, and death.

In the following sections, I will expand on Albee's substitution of the human with an animal at the center of *The Goat's* epiphanic recognition scene where Martin forms a queer kinship with the animal, which eventually results in broken ties with his wife. The recognition scene, the encounter between Martin and Sylvia, brings the animal into relation with the human in the sphere of ethics. Michael Y. Bennett terms Albee a humanistic playwright who depicts the human's journey of self-realization and reflects on ethical behavior in difficult situations.²⁸ Butler defines the human in terms of vulnerability, and Albee similarly seems to capture vulnerability as constitutive of who his characters are, human or animal. Martin's encounter with Sylvia is an “epiphany,” a revelation that opens the ethical space as it enables the advent of the (animal) other.²⁹ It is a recognition scene, one that opens Martin's eyes to the vulnerability of the other and that of his own.³⁰ When the affair is revealed to Stevie, wounded by rage and grief, she destroys the goat to injure Martin in revenge. Breaks in kinship, Butler contends, are part of its definition, and *The Goat* is a story of the bonds of kinship that get broken and those that get formed.

1 What Are We to One Another?

The opening scene depicts Stevie and Martin humorously bragging about their “perfect” marriage: “You're the love of my life, the mother of my handsome and worrisome son, my playmate, my cook, my bottlewasher.”³¹ They are waiting for their friend, Ross, to come over to record an interview with Martin on his exceptional achievement as an architect and the winner of the most prestigious prize in architecture. Exchanging jokes and forehead kisses, they appear to be a happy couple with a supposedly perfect life, but their happiness is poised for a fall once Martin reveals his extra-marital affair to Ross. He tells his old friend

28 Bennett, *Edward Albee and Absurdism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 2.

29 For Levinas, the face of the other represents an epiphany, which is the starting point for ethics. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Michael L. Morgan explains that Levinas uses the term “epiphany” (literally denoting “a theological expression for God's revelation”) to describe the way in which the face of the other is revealed to the self. The face is not a phenomenon; it is a visitation, one that “reveals” itself and calls forth responsibility for the other (44). In *The Goat*, Martin describes his encounter with Sylvia as “an epiphany.”

30 While Martin's recollection of his encounter with the goat could count as a scene of *anagnorisis*, or recognition, in Aristotelian terms, here I employ it in the sense of a Hegelian account of recognition and its appropriation by Levinas and Butler.

31 Albee, *The Goat?*, 542.

that he never expected any such thing to happen as he and Stevie have “always been good together—good in bed, good out; always honest, always ... considerate ... never physically untrue, as they say.”³² Martin seems to be the one among his acquaintances concerned with observing moral obligations:

All the men I knew were “having affairs” ... *seeing* other women, and laughing about it—at the club, on the train. I felt ... well, I almost felt like a misfit. “What’s the matter with you, Martin!? You mean you’re only doing it with your wife!? What kind of man *are* you?!”³³

Ironically, though, he is the one bound to be caught up in a moral scandal. He retells how, in search for a house in the country, he stops at the top of a hill with a spectacular view and “country smells.”³⁴ When he is getting back into the car, he sees Sylvia: “And there she was, looking at me with those eyes.”³⁵ He recollects the moment he fell in love: “I didn’t know what it was—What I was feeling. It was ... it wasn’t like anything I’d felt before; it was ... so ... amazing, so ... extraordinary! There she was, just looking at me, with those eyes of hers.”³⁶ He goes up to her, speaks to her, and recalls: “those eyes, and I touched her face.”³⁷ As soon as Martin shows the photograph of his “mistress” to Ross, the scene ends in Ross’ bewilderment: “THIS IS A GOAT! YOU’RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU’RE FUCKING A GOAT!”³⁸

Why would Albee replace the human with an animal at the center of his protagonist’s life-changing experience? In a conversation with Adrian Clarkson, Albee talks about animals:

Q: Are animals more interesting than people?

A: I don’t make that distinction usually. People do, between themselves ... and other animals.

Q: I think most people like animals.

A: I like animals too, but everything’s got to exist on two levels, a real level and a symbolic level. A play, to be at all interesting, has got to move on two or possibly three or four levels.³⁹

32 Ibid., 561.

33 Ibid., 593.

34 Ibid., 566.

35 Ibid., 567.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 568.

38 Ibid., 570.

39 Albee, quoted in Phillip C. Kolin, ed., *Conversations with Edward Albee* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 1988), 90.

This would suggest that in addition to undermining the distinction between human and animal, Martin's encounter with Sylvia moves the realistic ambience of the play onto a symbolic level and invites the audience to see beyond the literal in this extra-ordinary contact. While Albee's goat proves "real" as the blood-drenched carcass is dragged on stage at the end of the play, it also serves to convey something beyond a literal animal with whom Martin comes into sexual contact. On a symbolic level, this anthropomorphized goat could be any other—human and animal—with whom we enter into an ethical relation and anyone who makes an ethical demand upon us. It could also be anything that pushes us over the boundaries of what we are politically and culturally allowed to desire. Martin's encounter with Sylvia gives us a way of thinking about the relationship between the self and the other as well as an insight into the relation between ethics and violence. With the inclusion of an animal at the heart of his play, Albee brings the animal other into his experiment with the tragic genre to explore what it means to be human. This experiment challenges normative morality and destabilizes the conventional understandings of the tragic in crossing the boundaries between human and animal.

In another interview with Mark Anderson and Earl Ingersoll, Albee says, "the people wandering around in most of my plays are animals. We *are* animals, are we not?" and continues, "I'm interested in the fact that so much of what I think is wrong with the world has to do with the fact that man's nature is so close to the bestial. And we had better be a little more aware of it."⁴⁰ This remark gives an insight into the philosophical complications that the play introduces through interrogating the boundaries of human and animal. As Sherryl Vint suggests, philosophical scholarship by many, such as Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben, calls for "a rethinking of the human subject's relationship to its animal other as part of a transformation of ethics and politics."⁴¹ This scholarship makes clear that the inclusion of animals into our philosophical heritage informs the discriminatory hierarchies that humans established "to designate the other" and thus exclude certain human beings from the realm of ethics.⁴² Albee could be interpreted as having used bestiality as a metaphor for a society's tendency towards othering non-conformists, a political gesture undermining the norms that rule our ties to others. It might also have been an attempt to expose the animality he appears to see as inherent in the human by refusing to make a distinction between

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other: Animals, Kinship, and Butler's 'Clay's Ark,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 32, no. 2 (2005): 281.

⁴² Ibid., 282.

humans and “other animals.” Either way, Albee’s rupture of the tragic through centralizing an animal figure opens up a territory for philosophical observations in relation to recognition, responsibility, and relational vulnerability.

Albee thus subverts our expectations through the inclusion of a goat in the play’s love triangle and ends his re-definition of tragedy with the agonizing death of an anthropomorphized animal. The question to pose here is what actually happens between Martin and Sylvia? Martin’s encounter with the goat happens in the country, a pastoral setting unsettling the terms of the relationship between the human and nature, emblemizing the pre-linguistic encounter between Martin and his animal other. This extraordinary life-changing encounter in the midst of the smells and sights of the country has implications in Levinas’ ethics of the face and Butler’s account of vulnerability, providing a phenomenological description of Martin’s face-to-face encounter with the goat with whom he comes to form a relation of kin.

Levinas bases his work on the ethics of alterity, or the experience of the encounter with the other. According to Levinas and Butler’s clarification of his account, we are acted upon, at the most primary level, by others in ways over which we have no say and “this passivity, susceptibility, and condition of *being impinged upon* inaugurate who we are.”⁴³ This is a synchronic and infinitely recurring phenomenon. As Butler makes plain, this is a primary address, a pre-ontological voice that makes itself known in the face of the other.⁴⁴ Martin’s emphasis on the eyes and the face of the goat in his encounter calls forth the Levinasian face as the means of recognition: “The face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakens to the precariousness of the other.”⁴⁵ Martin’s exhaustive account of his first encounter with Sylvia shows how, in proximity with the animal, he is awakened to her precariousness:

I’d never seen such an expression. It was pure ... and trusting and ... and innocent; so ... so guileless. [...] Don’t you see the “thing” that happened to me? [...] I knelt there, eye level, and there was a ... a what? ... an understanding so intense, so natural ... [...] And there was a connection there—a communication—that, well ... an epiphany, I guess comes closest, and I knew what was going to happen.⁴⁶

43 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 90 (emphasis original).

44 Ibid.

45 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 167.

46 Albee, *The Goat*, 597–599.

It is thus through extending intersubjectivity into the sphere of human-animal encounter that Albee brings up the concepts of recognition and relationality in the context of his dramatic experiment with loss, love, sexuality, and aggression.

In a study of cultural animal representations in relation to the tragic dramatic genre, Una Chaudhuri focuses on the face-to-face encounters between human and animals and takes Albee's *The Goat* as an instance of a play that brings the animal into relationship with a key element of the definition of tragedy—recognition.⁴⁷ Chaudhuri locates Albee's play in relation to contemporary cultural modes of “facing the animal” and takes the play as an exploration of “the role of the animal—its face, body, being, meaning—in the constitution and defacing of the performance genres.”⁴⁸ Showing how animals have been “(de)faced” and represented as faceless, she cites Levinas' ethics of alterity and calls attention to his reluctance to ascribe an ethical face to animals. However, Levinas' writing on the face is more contentious when it comes to animals, and it seems that his conception of the face does not exclusively apply to humans. Peter Atterton (2011) argues that although Levinas was reluctant to extend moral consideration to non-human animals, his ethics of alterity and phenomenology of the face applies to all beings that can suffer and express suffering.⁴⁹ In a critique of Levinas' philosophy in relation to animal ethics, Matthew Calarco writes that Levinas takes a contradictory stance on the issue

47 Chaudhuri, “(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance,” 12.

48 Ibid., 16.

49 Peter Atterton, “Levinas and Our Moral Responsibility Toward Other Animals,” *Inquiry* 54, no. 6 (2011): 633–649, 633. As with Levinas, Butler has also been criticized for failing to adequately include the non-human in the sphere of ethics and politics. Chloë Taylor (2008) notes that in her writing, Butler repeatedly excludes animals from the sphere of ethical consideration, and by emphasizing that she talks about an ethics of the human, she denies the possibility of including the non-human within her ethical thought (61). However, Taylor argues that Butler's work contains the potential to be expanded upon to respond to the suffering of the non-human animal. Her *Precarious Life*, she maintains, presents Levinasian ethical theory in the light that sets the stage for including the non-human in the sphere of ethical responsibility. James Stanescu (2012) writes that although Butler has repeatedly engaged in anthropocentric rhetoric, her fragmentary pieces on animals offer “powerful tools for fighting for a nonanthropocentric world” (571), and he pushes against the trend to see Butler's philosophy as anthropocentric. Richard Iveson (2012) also engages with Butler's work to emphasize the necessity of the inclusion of non-human animals in the ethical domain. See Taylor, “The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee and Animal Ethics,” *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 1 (2008): 60–72; Stanescu, “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 567–582; Iveson, “Domestic Scenes and Species Trouble—On Judith Butler and Other Animals,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 20–40.

of animal ethicality. While Levinas' writing on a particular dog named Bobby implies that he ascribes a face to the animal, "in which he finds both a vital force and a vulnerability evoking pity," elsewhere he takes an agnostic position by stating, "I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called 'face.' I don't know if a snake has a face."⁵⁰ However, Levinas himself has admitted that the face is not exclusively a human face. It could be anything expressive of states of mind in a penetrating way, "a pure denuding of exposure without defense."⁵¹ He holds that "without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings."⁵² Martin's goat has a face, making an ethical demand that alters him in perpetuity. This is a goat's face, whose vulnerability, like that of any human's face, creates what Butler sees as a perplexing primary impulse: the desire to kill or a lust for violence that is constantly at war with the anxiety about hurting the other.⁵³

In *Precarious Life*, Butler clarifies that the face of the other—the ethical demand made by the other—is a "vocalization of agony that is not yet language"; this is what wakens us to the precariousness of the other's life.⁵⁴ Butler expands on this conception of the face to explain "how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse."⁵⁵ The goat, on whose face Martin puts so much emphasis, is the other who makes an ethical demand upon him, which he interprets as love and realizes in sexual violation of the animal's body. If, in a moment of recognition, Martin is addressed by the goat's face and is wakened to her vulnerability, why is it that he inflicts violence on the animal? It is true that he assumes his sexual relation with the goat is a romantic realization of a reciprocal love, but how could he know that the animal loves him? Even if she does, how would that entitle him to sexual contact that he claims is consensual?⁵⁶ Stevie must be right to bring up the problem of the animal's

50 Matthew Calarco, "Faced by Animals," in *Radicalizing Levinas*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 124.

51 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 167.

52 Levinas, quoted in Calarco, "Faced by Animals," 124.

53 Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 136–137.

54 *Ibid.*, 139.

55 *Ibid.*, 131.

56 Martin's relationship with the goat is never witnessed on stage, but in response to questions relating to the nature of his relationship, he confirms that he has had sexual intercourse with the animal and claims that the contact has been consensual. He appears to assume that the goat loves him (603) and makes remarks such as "[...] I realized [...] that she and I were going to go to bed together. [...] That we wanted each other very much, that I had to have her" (601).

consent: "You take advantage of this ... creature!? You ... *rape* this ... animal and convince yourself that it has to do with love!?"⁵⁷ Martin tells Stevie that he will not disclose the specifics of his sex with Sylvia, so he does not respond to Stevie's inquiries into how he has come to the conclusion that Sylvia actually "wants" him: "What does she do—back into you making awful little bleating sounds? [...] *Presented* herself? Down on her forelegs, her head turned, her eyes on you ..." ⁵⁸ Whether or not Sylvia performs any of what Stevie lists here, Martin's sexual engagement with the animal would be a physical violation of the animal body.⁵⁹ It seems that in an epiphanic moment of recognition, he feels the vulnerability of the animal and his primary response to it is violence. Levinas suggests that the face and the eyes of the other "offer an absolute resistance to possession ... in which the temptation to murder is inscribed.... This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face," and to see a face, he continues, is to hear "You shall not kill," which is an invitation to non-violence.⁶⁰

If the face conveys such a commandment to non-violence, why is it that Martin, having been wakened to the animal's precariousness, extends his relation with the animal to a sexual contact that violates the animal's body? Levinas goes on to explain that although the face forebodes violence, "the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity."⁶¹ As Butler makes plain, to respond to the face and understand its meaning is "to be awake to what is precarious in another life."⁶² However, Levinas writes that the face of the other in its precariousness is not only a call to peace, the "You shall not kill," but also a temptation to kill. Butler poses the question, why would the face "produce the temptation to kill *at the same time* that it delivers a demand for peace?" and responds that the face "bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing."⁶³ At the basis of any relation with the other, therefore, "there is anxiety about hurting the Other" and "fear for one's own

57 Albee, *The Goat?*, 603.

58 Ibid.

59 While there are opposing views on the criminality of bestiality, it is widely accepted as a violation of the animal in terms such as consent, violence, and the animal incapacity for responding to a human's sexual advances in ways that are clearly understandable to the human. For an interpretation of bestiality as an "interspecies sexual assault," see Piers Beirne, "Rethinking Bestiality: Towards a Concept of Interspecies Sexual Assault," *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 3 (1997): 317–340.

60 Levinas, Quoted in Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 92.

61 Levinas, quoted in Butler, *Precarious Life*, 132.

62 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134.

63 Ibid., 135.

survival.”⁶⁴ One inflicts violence to foreclose the possibility of undergoing violence. The ethical injunction is then to militate against the primary desire to violence.⁶⁵ Martin seems to be unable to marshal his impulse to violence in the service of an internal conduit for killing his “own aggression and sense of priority.”⁶⁶

In *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human*, Kelly Oliver refers to the philosophical question of vulnerability as constitutive of humanity and argues that as we share mortality and embodied vulnerability with animals, ethical responsibility ought to be extended to non-human animals.⁶⁷ The fact that human beings are both vulnerable and violent, Oliver argues, has implications for their relation to animals because “violence toward and domination over animals” secures their “identity as properly human.”⁶⁸

While Martin forms a kin relation with the goat, on the one hand he is faced by an animal’s guileless innocent eyes and feels peace and love and a transcendental experience. On the other hand, in response to the goat’s vulnerability, he evidently resorts to violating the animal’s body as he claims to have had sexual contact with the animal. Martin’s encounter with Sylvia, along the lines of Butler’s exegesis of kinship trouble, suggests that kinship happens when we are least sure about what we are to one another, “trying to focus, vacillating, suspended in a state of protracted incredulity” and this is a “recurring feature of becoming kin.”⁶⁹

As Martin and the goat become kin, the self-other ethical relation is taken to the level of human and non-human, and the threat of Martin’s bestiality being revealed to the public places him in the midst of a disturbed encounter with society. This is the society that, on the one hand, puts him under the pressure that he should be “doing it” with someone other than his wife if he has got “lust”: “People looked at me, said ‘What’s the matter with you?!’ ‘Don’t you have any ... you know, lust?’ And ‘Sure,’ I said, ‘I’ve got plenty. All for Stevie.’”⁷⁰ The same society, on the other hand, would embarrass him in shame if it found out about his goat. As Ross implies to Martin, it is not the scandalous affair itself that matters; it is the affair being revealed to the public that is important. Embezzlement and going to whores would be no issue because he would get away

64 Ibid., 136–137.

65 Ibid, 137.

66 Ibid.

67 Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 42.

68 Ibid., 313.

69 Butler, “Kinship Trouble.”

70 Albee, *The Goat*, 593.

with it, but bestiality is something he cannot “get by,” and the irony is that here Martin is the one showing a more ethical consciousness:

MARTIN: Is *that* what it is, then? That people will *know*!? That people will find *out*!? That I can do whatever I want, and that's what matters!? That people will find out!? Fuck the ... thing *itself*!? Fuck what it *means*!? That people will find *out*!?

...

MARTIN: So that's what it comes down to, eh? ... what we can get away with?

ROSS: Sure.

MARTIN: Oh, thank God! It's so simple! I thought it was ... I thought it had to do with love and loss, and it's only about ... getting *by* ...⁷¹

The revelation of the truth to Stevie stirs in her rage and grief that leads to speculations on killing Martin and bringing him down, ending in the fulfillment of her murderous desire upon the innocent goat. The experience of loss, rage, passion, and grief awakens all to their vulnerability—to how they are undone by each other and the social conditions of their living.

2 Vacillating in Confusion

The Goat arguably gives us an account of ecstatic subjectivity—that we are all formed in ecstatic relationality, being vulnerable in that we are exposed to what is beyond us, being vulnerable and bound to others by passion, grief, and rage. Martin's encounter with the goat is a transformative encounter, one through which he is transported outside of himself by passion. When describing his experience, Martin admits, “It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it ... took me with it, and it was ... an ecstasy and a purity.”⁷² Stevie hears the truth, and she too is taken outside of herself, but with grief and rage. In *Precarious Life*, Butler addresses the issue of grief as a moment of ecstasy—being beside oneself—a moment “in which one undergoes something outside one's control.”⁷³ To be ecstatic, Butler holds, is “to be transported beyond

⁷¹ Ibid., 620.

⁷² Ibid., 598. Ecstasy has its root in the Greek word *ekstasis*. The notion of ecstasy occupies a significant place in Greek tragedy, as it is closely associated with the rituals of the worship of the god Dionysus, from which tragedy hypothetically originated.

⁷³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief.”⁷⁴ Passion, grief, and rage “tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally.”⁷⁵

Butler suggests that everyone lives, in certain ways, beside themselves, whether in sexual passion, grief, or rage. This is the worldview to which Martin adheres when he says to Ross:

Is there anything anyone doesn't get off on, whether we admit it or not—whether we *know* it or not? Remember Saint Sebastian with all the arrows shot into him? He probably came! God knows the faithful did! Shall I go on!? You want to hear about the cross!?

⁷⁶

In tandem with her reflections in *Precarious Life*, Butler's lecture on the opening night of the 2014 PEN World Voices Festival addresses the issues of rage and grief. She quotes Anne Carson on the relation of rage to grief in tragedy: “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are so full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”⁷⁷ Stevie, Martin, and Billy are all full of grief. Grief follows loss and *The Goat* is imbued with the sense of loss. It might be the grief over the loss of a sense of belonging that pushes Martin to take his fellows' advice—getting “someone” with whom to have an affair, or it could be disillusionment with his seemingly “perfect” marriage, as Stevie puts it into perspective:

I have heard you tell me [...] how we have been a more perfect marriage than chance would even *allow*. We're both too bright for most of the shit. We see the deep and awful humor of things go over the heads of most people; we see what's hideously wrong in what most people accept as normal.⁷⁸

Such an elevated sense of awareness—that of ultimate alienation, disillusionment with marriage and with life in a broader sense as well as the acknowledgment of the bitterness felt in stagnating into the “normal”—could well have

⁷⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁶ Albee, *The Goat*, 618.

⁷⁷ Butler, “On the Edge: Grief” (Opening Night of PEN World Voices Festival, May 1, 2014), accessed October 1, 2017, <https://pen.org/on-the-edge-grief/> (transcript), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNmZSR0mzeo> (video). Here Butler is quoting from Carson's *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006).

⁷⁸ Albee, *The Goat*, 603.

forced Martin into seeking refuge in a romantic relationship with a goat.⁷⁹ The encounter with the animal in the midst of the sounds and smells of the country, awakening his animal self, could have been his prospect for escaping a dreadful vegetable life and a rising sense of loss. However, it adversely creates further loss, and there seems to be no way out of this vicious circle.

The goat scandal also leads Stevie to confronting the emptiness of her marriage, overwhelming her with the pain of loss. She loses Martin as he “screws up” by breaking something that cannot be fixed, by loving her and an animal equally, “shatter[ing] the glass” and closing every possibility for forgiveness.⁸⁰ In revenge, she makes Martin lose both herself and Sylvia: “You have brought me down, you goat-fucker; you love of my life! [...] You have brought me down, and, Christ! I’ll bring you down with me!”⁸¹ As Butler argues, kinship relations are characterized by doubleness and passions that constantly disrupt one another; they are “sites of murderous pleasure and infinite remorse.”⁸²

Not only Martin and Stevie but Billy is also full of grief. He is living in a condition of ecstasy not only due to his recently discovered homosexual desire that constantly makes him confuse love and sexuality but also through grief over misrecognitions at work between himself and his kinship ties. Whilst his father seems to recognize him as a homosexual, he wounds him, in moments of rage, by calling him names such as “fucking faggot.”⁸³ As Martin tells the story of a father (appearing to be himself) getting an erection when putting his toddler son on his lap, Billy makes a desperate plea: “Was it me? Was it me, Dad? Was the baby me?”⁸⁴ His confused relationship with his ties as well as his misrecognized sexual identity breeds within him a sense of loss:

... while great old Mom and great old Dad have been doing the great old parent thing, one of them has been underneath the house, down in the cellar, digging a pit so deep!, so wide!, so ... HUGE! ... we’ll all fall in and

79 The idea of disillusionment and loss is a prevalent theme in Albee’s drama and can be traced in many of his plays. Here I can name Peter’s disillusionment in *The Zoo Story* which is realized through Jerry’s self-sacrifice; Nancy’s and Charlie’s encounter with the anthropomorphized lizards leading to a painful awareness of loss, suffering and death in *Seascape*; disillusionments brought about in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* through the encounter between a middle-aged and a young couple as well as through the symbolic killing of the unseen longed-for son; and Harry’s and Edna’s sudden feeling of terror in *A Delicate Balance*, which makes them seek refuge in their friends’ place.

80 Ibid., 604.

81 Ibid., 605.

82 Butler, “Kinship Trouble.”

83 Albee, *The Goat*, 572.

84 Ibid., 617.

... and never ... be ... able ... to ... climb ... out ... again—no matter how much we want to, how hard we try.⁸⁵

Loss can stir up rage, growing into violence, leading to further loss time and again. Stricken with grief and driven by loss, Stevie finds herself devastated in being loved by Martin in an equal amount to an animal. Having lost, Stevie feels that she has been brought down to nothing.⁸⁶ This experience delineates the ties she has to Martin, and with the loss of these ties that constitute her sense of self, she no longer knows who she is. She falls into grief, and grief, in Butler's words,

displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.⁸⁷

In grief, or in "deep woe," as Stevie herself puts it, she apprehends how vulnerable she is, how physically dependent, beyond herself, to the other: "I've laid it all out for you; I'm naked on the table; take all your knives! Cut me! Scar me forever!"⁸⁸

Why does she engage in violence and kill the goat? This could be because, as Butler writes, "violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves, for one another."⁸⁹ Stevie engages in violence because "grief is unbearable and from that unbearability one kills."⁹⁰ But how does unbearable grief transition to uncontrollable rage and, consequently, to destructiveness? Butler calls this a terrible circle, one in which we destroy to bring an end to our unbearable grief, but then we redouble that loss by destroying again. The destructive act is meant to announce that the unbearable is now another person's problem. Once Stevie brings down Martin by destroying the goat, will she be relieved of grief? The final scene would suggest not. The death of Sylvia cannot mend those broken bonds; it drags them further down into the abyss of grief.

85 Ibid., 614.

86 Ibid., 605.

87 Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge), 19.

88 Albee, *The Goat*, 595.

89 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 22.

90 Butler, "On the Edge: Grief."

3 Breaking the Bond

The surprise ending brings Stevie back on to the stage, covered in blood: “*STEVIE is dragging a dead goat. The goat’s throat is cut; the blood is down STEVIE’s dress, on her arms. She stops.*”⁹¹ As Albee’s stage directions read, Stevie’s face is “without emotion.”⁹² Ross is immobile with horror while Billy and Martin are crying. Everyone, including the audience, is confronted by, and potentially empathizing with, the vulnerability of the animal body dragged on stage, drenched in blood:

BILLY: (*Generally; to no one; helpless; a quiet plea*) Help. Help.

...

MARTIN: What have you done!? Oh, my God, what have you done!?!⁹³

In Albee’s “definition of tragedy,” then, Martin, the tragic hero, is ultimately ruined at the sight of his beloved mistress’ blood-covered corpse. It is not a human corpse but that of an animal, yet it seems to be as agonizing a death as that of a human could ever be.⁹⁴ The goat with its cut throat, evoking the idea of scapegoat and sacrificial animal, testifies to Albee’s invocation of ancient tragedy and sacrifice within the context of contemporary life—an innovation in modern drama in itself.⁹⁵ Kelly Oliver refers to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* to write that “human kinship is dependent on the sacrifice of an animal kin and eventually the sacrifice of animal kinship altogether.”⁹⁶ Stevie makes it clear that she cannot stand being loved by Martin in equal measure as a goat. In the same vein as Oliver presents Freud’s anthropological accounts, this could be a foreclosure of animal kinship for the sake of the form of human kinship that is

91 Albee, *The Goat*, 621.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 This also brings to mind Medea’s killing of her own children (in Euripides’ *Medea*), planned to bring down their father by depriving him of that which he held the most precious to himself. It could be taken as another instance of Albee’s invocation of ancient tragedy, but one that is subversive in that what the tragic hero holds so dear to himself is a goat mistress whose eventual death works to bring him down just as the death of a human kin would.

95 This innovative appropriation is seen not only in *The Goat* but also in other Albee plays in which sacrifice is involved—Jerry’s self-sacrifice in *The Zoo Story*, the mutilation and murder of the “bumble of joy” in *The American Dream*, the killing of the illusory son in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, dead Teddy in *A Delicate Balance*, and Julian’s sacrifice to Alice in *Tiny Alice*.

96 Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*, 274.

recognized as family. “Human kinship,” Oliver writes, “is based on a fundamental sacrifice of animal kinship both on literal and symbolic levels.”⁹⁷ However, Stevie’s “sacrifice” of the goat cannot revive the broken bonds of kinship between Martin and Stevie. The helpless Martin we see in the final scene of the play is not only grieving the goat’s death but also his estrangement from Stevie. He earlier scorned Ross for having revealed his secret to his wife: “I could have worked it out! And now nothing can ever be put back together! Ever!”⁹⁸ At the end, he is mourning not only the death of the animal but also his lost ties with Stevie—the ties that they lose to passion, grief, and rage.

Vulnerability to the other is part of the bodily life not only of humans but also of animals. Martin practices with an animal his private understanding of a prohibited form of kinship that subjects the animal to bodily violence. Enraged, Stevie breaks her ties with Martin and inflicts her desire for violence upon the animal. Albee said that *The Goat* “is about love, and loss, the limits of our tolerance and who, indeed, we really are.”⁹⁹ Albee’s account of “love and loss” portrays formative vulnerability and violence in a chain of human-animal and human-human encounters that work to unravel the crisis of kinship. At the end of the play, we see all the bonds broken, but to put it in Butler’s words, “[t]hat breakability *is* the bond.”¹⁰⁰ Ambivalently, then, those ties exist in virtue of the very passions that break them. Albee’s dramatic innovation—climaxing around a goat mistress sacrificed to human passions—subverts not only the conventional perceptions of tragedy but also the boundaries of kinship between and across humans and animals. Staging both human and animal as vulnerable, *The Goat* is wrought with the inherent ambivalence of the relations through which we are being continually formed and simultaneously undone.

97 Ibid., 248.

98 Albee, *The Goat*, 619.

99 Albee, quoted in Toby Silverman Zinman, *Edward Albee* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 141.

100 Butler, “Kinship Trouble.” Emphasis added.

A Queer Reading of Love in Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*

Ashley Raven

Abstract

"A Queer Reading of Love in Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*" discusses the innovation behind Albee's 1977 play. Albee destabilizes the socially acceptable concepts of marriage and love through his use of language to expose them as merely performative acts that lack deeper emotional meaning through the now arcane conduit of vaudeville. *Counting the Ways* forces its characters to confront their illusions about these sacrosanct rites of human life by questioning themselves, their marriage, and whether or not love exists within it. The search for truth leads the characters to "identify themselves" to the audience who serve as witnesses to this deconstruction of a typical American marriage.

From the 1960s through the beginning of the twenty-first century, Edward Albee has been at the forefront of American theatrical innovators who challenge the status quo. While throughout his career as a playwright Albee has been misidentified as an absurdist, "deep[ly] estranged from American life,"¹ his point of view is better summarized by Michael Rutenberg: "Edward Albee has never believed ... that man is a helpless pawn caught in the capricious grip of an absurd and indifferent universe.... Albee is, and has always been, a social protester deeply moral and committed to the cause of human dignity in an ethically moribund age."² The preponderance of Albee's life's work has been dedicated to rousing the public from their political and social slumber by providing them a mirror and a magnifying glass. The close examination of the self and of one's isolation or solidification of a place in the world is a thematic thread within Albee's works, as Thomas P. Adler affirms in "Albee's 3½: The Pulitzer plays":

1 Sharon D. Spencer, "Edward Albee—The Anger Artist," in *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*, ed. Philip C. Kolin and J. Madison Davis (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 137.

2 Michael Rutenberg, "Albee in Protest," in *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*, 124–125.

Albee is continually beginning again, there is a thematic coherence from play to play that imparts to his body of work a unity of purpose and perspective as he explores the isolation that results from lack of communication and rejection because of difference—often times sexual in nature; the complacency and stasis that result from settling in and settling for less rather than challenging moral norms and the status quo; the angst and ennui that accompany one's sense of lost possibilities and diminishing opportunities for change with the passage of time; the retreat into illusion as a comfort against facing the abyss and the fact of mortality; the need for a love that is crucial and unafraid to hurt, and for contact and communion with the other to provide strength against the terror of existence.³

In the case of *Counting the Ways* (1976), subtitled "A Vaudeville," Albee creates the characters of He and She, who begin to question their love for each other and, consequently, they are led to question the status of their marriage. Written and performed in the vaudeville style, *Counting the Ways* shares "familiar Albee topics found in other plays, but ... the images are even more unsettling and disorienting because of the dissonance between form and content."⁴ However, Albee's innovation of using vaudeville in a contemporary marriage play is the very element that causes enough "disturbance," in Albee's words, to identify alternate interpretations of the play.⁵ Even as far back as Marshall D. Beuick's "The Vaudeville Philosopher" (1925), it was recognized that "'concerned volition' ... [a term] used by sociologists and psychologists ... the basis of all sympathetic like-mindedness is found in a predominance of prompt response to stimulus, emotionalism, imaginativeness, suggestibility and the habit of reasoning from analogy."⁶ Beuick's point of view on the immediacy of the theatre's ability to affect the minds of its audience members is perhaps most apt in the vaudeville genre. In *Counting the Ways*, vaudeville presents itself through the actors' personal monologues, swift blackouts, emphasis placed on the "common, limited, and not too optimistic view of life," and the careful

3 Adler, "Albee's 3 1/2: The Pulitzer play," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen J. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.

4 Linda Ben-Zvi, "Playing the Cloud Circuit," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 188.

5 "Edward Albee: An Interview," in *Edward Albee: Planned Wilderness: Interview, Essays and Bibliography*, ed. Patricia De La Fuente (Pan American University Press), 7.

6 Marshall D. Beuick, "The Vaudeville Philosopher," in *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Knopf, 1984), 332.

attention paid to language.⁷ The character of She agonizes over the word “love”: “Do you *love* me?”⁸ With particular emphasis placed on the word “love,” not only is He confronted with the precise definition of its meaning but so, too, is the audience. It is as if, for the first time in a long time, or for the first time ever, the word “love” has taken on an unfamiliar meaning, a meaning too indeterminate to verbalize. In this way, Albee’s meticulous use of language leads to his queering of heterosexual marriage and the very idea of love itself through the play’s title, a reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, “How Do I Love Thee?,” symbols of love such as the rose, and the conflation of love with sex.

According to Frederick L. Greene, to apply queer theory to a text is to “dis-identify and to denaturalize, to make one’s object un-natural ... to strategically produce difference out of what was once familiar.”⁹ Greene further writes, “Queer theorists are especially interested in the opposition between the ‘same’ and the ‘different,’ both for its epistemological centrality and because the reductive simplicity of this binarism impoverishes our capacity to represent and understand the world.”¹⁰ For example, as Albee queers “marriage” and “love,” Greene queers the term “family.” On the surface, like “marriage” and “love,” the term’s meaning seems clear and uncomplicated due to its routine societal use. However, as Greene further questions the meaning of the term “family,” he refers to it as a “mythologized ... haven from the hostile world of commercial competition, a place of last resort where ‘if you go there they have to take you in.’”¹¹ Yet, with more analysis, other issues associated with the concept of “family,” such as America’s history involving immigration and the battle for independence, arise. As Greene asserts, “America ... is the land of the individual, of self-made men, where what counts is not who your family is or was, but who *you* are,” despite such popularly peddled notions as the family being responsible for “build[ing] character, social[izing] the individual for society, and provid[ing] a moral education.”¹² Likewise, Albee destabilizes our concepts of marriage and love not only through his use of language but also through the

7 Ibid., 329.

8 Albee, *Counting the Ways and Listening: Two Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1978), 9. All references to the play are to this edition.

9 Greene, “Introducing Queer Theory into the Undergraduate Classroom: Abstractions and Practical Applications,” *English Education* 28, no. 4 (December 1996): 327, ERIC, accessed June 28, 2018.

10 Ibid., 327.

11 Ibid., 334.

12 Ibid., 334–335.

archaic conduit of vaudeville to expose love and marriage as merely performative acts that lack deeper emotional meaning.

The cyclical nature of He and She's communication in *Counting the Ways* establishes a pattern of behavior. The play begins with She's question, "Do you love me?" and ends with He wondering, "Do you love me?"¹³ In between their questioning of each other, He and She reflect on personal histories, break from the facade of the play to identify themselves, then make the intentional decision to return to their marriage with the underlying question of whether love exists between them.

In *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?*, Foster Hirsch asserts that Albee was "infatuated with generalization and abstraction."¹⁴ Evidence of this obsession is apparent in the first page of *Counting the Ways*:

SHE: (*Puts her magazine down, looks at him for a little while, He reads, closes book and crosses U.R. Objective curiosity.*) Do you love me?
 HE: (*At R. exit. Takes a while to register that He has been asked a question.*) Hm?
 Pardon?
 SHE: (*Even more emphasis on the word "love."*) Do you love me?
 HE: (*Considers it for quite a while, suspicious.*) Why do you ask?
 SHE: (*Considers that.*) Well: because I want to know.
 HE: (*Pause; puzzled.*) Right now?
 SHE: (*Suddenly uncertain.*) Well ... yes. Or ... no, no, not really. (*Short pause.*) Yes.

She's casual questioning turned insistence on He's declaration of love is met by He's need for clarification, first of the question itself, followed by the desired immediacy of his response. The second scene of the play opens with She shouting out a list of desperate items: "Walnuts! (*This is a list, small expectant pauses.*) Parsley! Bone marrow! (*He enters R.*) Celery root! Crème brûlée! (*Pause enthusiastic.*) Do you love me?!" To which He responds, "Of course!" Inserting love at the end of a mundane shopping list underscores Albee's critique of the thoughtless and emotionally bereft way the word is often used. Despite He's

¹³ Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 9, 30.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?* (Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book, 1978), 79.

affirmation of his love for She, tension between the married couple begins to build. In Kolin's "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*: The Ways of Losing Heart," this tension between He and She is echoed in the tension between the form and content of the play, which reveals "the play's subject matter ... the state of modern marriage."¹⁵ Kolin further connects marriage to the outdated vaudeville style of the play:

The choice of this once popular form of entertainment suggests the atmosphere and structural qualities which Albee needed in order to reproduce the meaninglessness in his couple's lives.... Moreover, vaudeville thrives on parody and frequently offers a parody of itself. Indeed, antiquated burlesque nicely characterizes the aging pair's search for meaning. In fact, *Counting the Ways* parodies romantic comedy, vaudeville-style. The quest of a romantic comedy is to find out if boy loves girl and *vice versa*.¹⁶

For example, in Scene 3, She describes having sex with He: "Do you suppose stuffing it in me for you fat and flabby is something I enjoy? Do you? Putting it in me like a wad of dough ... hoping it'll 'rise' to the occasion? Do you think that fills me with a sense of ... what? Fills me with anything but itself?"¹⁷ She's unabashed description of their sexual intercourse is riddled with dissatisfaction as she emphasizes its mechanical, detached nature recollects the earlier scene, when She asks He if he loves her as the last item in her shopping list. She concludes, exasperated, "And knowing all that, what do you call it now!?" (*Short pause.*) You call it love!"¹⁸ These first three scenes of the play bring into sharp focus the decaying state of marriage and love in He and She's relationship and in society at large. The incongruity that exists for She in equating sex with love is a significant barrier in her marriage and in her relationship with He. In this way, as Albee queers the use of love in language, he also calls into question love's correlation to sexual expression. For She, love and sex appear to be mutually exclusive at this stage in her marriage to He.

The breakdown of He and She's verbal and physical communication speaks to Deborah R. Geis' classification of Albee's characters as "hypereloquent."

15 Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*: The Ways of Losing Heart," in *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, ed. J.N. Wasserman, Joy L. Linsley, and Jerome A. Kramer (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1983), 122.

16 *Ibid.*, 123.

17 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 10.

18 *Ibid.*

She's "hypereloquence" intensifies into this sexually frustrated monologue addressed, in part, to the audience who is "unable ... to offer the responses that would transform the monologue to dialogue."¹⁹ She's monologue is a prime example of how complications with language manifest as complications in relationships through much of Albee's work.

For example, in the following scene, He is reading the newspaper when he comes across the phrase, "love in the afternoon." When She reenters the room, the two debate the meaning of the phrase. She immediately identifies the phrase to mean "sex in the afternoon," to which He responds, "Really? That's what they *mean*? Sex in the afternoon? Love means sex? I mean, to *them*?"²⁰ Like She, He also distinguishes between the concept of love and the physical actualization of love. He's questioning of the phrase then leads to further miscommunication between He and She. She declares, "Sure: love means sex; eyes are thighs; lips means hips."²¹ He awkwardly tries to make sense of She's phrasing, in which She substitutes sexualized words for the romanticized references found in traditional sonnets. Instead of love, there is sex. Instead of eyes and lips at the top of the body, She equates them with thighs and hips, the sexual epicenter of the body. In addition, Kolin connects the phrase "love in the afternoon" with the 1957 film of the same name, starring Maurice Chevalier, Gary Cooper, and Audrey Hepburn, in which a married man plots murder after he discovers his wife is having an affair with another man.²² While this kind of passion does not seem to exist between He and She, Albee's mention of such violent affection further connects with Lois Tyson's theory on such acts of "transgressive heterosexuality": "[it] throws into question the rules of traditional heterosexuality and this opens the door of imagination to transgressive sexualities of all kinds ... the leading of double lives, the relaxing of inhibitions ... create an atmosphere of sexual experimentation that sets the stage, so to speak, for a queer interpretation."²³ Shortly thereafter in Scene 6, She further expands on the concept of "love in the afternoon" by recoiling at the thought of "love at night" as a mixture of bile, regrets, being half numb, and harboring "a little hatred with each thrust."²⁴ Instead of He responding to She, He is

19 Geis, "Staging Hypereloquence: Edward Albee and the Monologic Voice," in *New Readings in American Drama: Something's Happening Here*, ed. Norma Margaret Jenckes (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 1.

20 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 11.

21 Ibid.

22 Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 123.

23 Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-friendly Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 343.

24 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 12.

still caught up in the cumbersome task of decoding “love in the afternoon.” She ends the scene by asking for the time, distancing herself and the audience again from the sexual content of her monologue.

In Scene 7, He performs the “She loves me. She loves me not.” ritual. The age-old ritual or game begins with a person focusing on another for whom they have strong affection while holding a flower, in the case of *Counting the Ways*, a rose. With the object of their desire in mind, the person then begins to pick the petals off the flower, one at a time, while alternating the phrases, “He/She loves me. He/She loves me not.” Whichever phrase is spoken as the last petal is plucked is the end of the game, resulting in either the reciprocation or denial of the person’s love. As He “*depetal[s]*” the rose, he ends with the last petal on “She loves me not.” After “*look[ing] very seriously at the audience*,” He consumes the rose as if hiding the result of the game from the audience.²⁵ At first, He’s reaction to the result of a frivolous game may seem comical, but upon further reflection, the audience must consider what it would mean for their marriage if He loved She, but She did not love He. As a symbol of love, the rose is queered by Albee through He’s ingestion of it. Through the innocent process of playing the “She loves me. She loves me not.” game, He has uncovered new meaning in the word love and the rose itself. Instead of leading to the verification that his marriage to She is based on love, He’s thoughts spiral into chaos followed by an immediate blackout. Kolin writes about the vaudevillian inspired blackout technique: “these blackouts represent the separateness, the apartness-on-stage, that is within He and She. Ironically, the very aspects which most disturbed the critics may be meaningful as commentary on the status of the two characters. We are supposed to be bothered by these aspects of the play just as we are supposed to be bothered by aspects of He’s and She’s lives.”²⁶ The blackouts that end each of the twenty-one scenes comprising the play not only emphasize the mental separation of He and She, according to Kolin, but also their “escape [from] the responsibilities of intimacy.”²⁷ What happens during these blackouts and the amount of time that has passed between scenes is vague. By the time the next scene begins, She directly challenges He by demanding to know why he ate the rose: “Why didn’t you just *ask* me?” To which He responds, “Well, I had already begun with the *rose*, and it was here and you were not....”²⁸ Again, we see He prefer the game’s arbitrary answer to directly asking She for her answer as a method of self- and marital preservation.

25 Ibid., 13.

26 Kolin, “Edward Albee’s *Counting the Ways*,” 124.

27 Ibid., 124.

28 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 14.

Next, in Scene 9, She attempts to pick up He's discarded petals. Albee's meticulousness with language reveals itself again, thus confounding the communication between He and She. She begins to play with the game's words by musing: "Not me loves he? Me loves he? Not me loves he? Me loves he?"²⁹ In his stage directions, Albee instructs that by the end of going back and forth between these options, She should establish a mood of "confusion and bitterness."³⁰ She's frustration with the language of love further complicates their relationship when He calls her "silly" for picking up his discarded petals. In response, She exits briskly, leaving He to "[stand] for a moment, looking after her," signifying their lack of successful communication particularly with regard to their feelings for each other.³¹

In Scene 10, He is alone on stage as he proceeds to recite a monologue focused on the memory of playing yet another iteration of the "She loves me. She loves me not." game: blowing dandelions. He states:

One blew them for a reason. What was it? In the fall, when we were young. Was it for love? I mean, was it a way of telling? (*Pause.*) I could look it up. I *could*, I probably *will*, but not knowing anymore—having known of course, *aware* of that, and longer—there's a kind of shivery thing there.³²

With no meaningful response from She offstage, He is left to grapple with this gap in his memory and further scrutinizes his past and present perception of love. Even a simple childhood memory of playing with dandelions is questioned for further meaning. He's lack of certainty as to whether or not the dandelions signify love identifies the emotional shift He has experienced over this course of his life. At one time, dandelions may have held a seemingly straightforward romantic connection for He, but, over time, that connection has been all but lost. No longer can love be symbolized by a humble weed. The very existence of love now seems tenuous due to the complications of marriage.

Later in the same scene, He confers with She about the dandelion game as a representation of love. Instead of answering He, She continues to talk about the roses from the previous scene:

SHE: (*Pause, thinks for a bit.*) We shouldn't each have a rose like this; they should be together; one of us should have both of them.

29 Ibid., 15.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 15–16.

HE: (*Pause, a slight, superior laugh.*) What will you do, make an arrangement?

SHE: (*Pauses momentarily, snaps.*) Never mind. (*Exits with her rose, L.C.*)

HE: (*Looks after her, pause.*) I think it was for love; it was a long time ago. (*He looks at his rose, holds it at stiff arm's length toward her exit, closes his eyes tight.*) Here.³³

Again, He and She's lack of common vocabulary to fully discuss the symbolic implications of not only gathering roses together but also giving a rose illustrates their fundamental misunderstanding of love and marriage. She wants to gather their roses together, identifying her union with He, while He dismisses the sincerity of her gesture with the suggestion of an "arrangement," suggesting their marriage is much more like a legal contract than a romantic one. After She hurriedly exits, He decides to offer She the rose, but it is too late. They have misunderstood each other once again now due to the queering of a simple flower.

Despite She's exit, He persistently offers She the rose leading to her own memory monologue in Scene 12. While it features more details than He's, it is far less wistful about love, signifying the possibility of a significant divide between He and She on the topic. She recalls her high school prom during which she wound up with two dates due to her perceived lack of specificity in her word choice. At the beginning of the memory, She states:

I had come, I think, with the boy my mother said I should, and that didn't matter, for one was like another. I think I was *sixteen*. One was like another: one bit his nails; one wore brown shoes, dirty brown shoes with his tux; another ...these roses will wilt. Ah, well. One was like another and it didn't matter.³⁴

Love does not even remotely enter She's reflection on this significant teenage rite of passage despite her reference to the roses He has given her in the present. She remains far removed from any emotional connection to the boys who accompanied her and to He, whose symbolic gesture of love provides no reassurance to her. Her aloofness suggests her desire to remain removed from the emotions of love despite her marital status. Kolin asserts, "[i]n place of

33 Ibid., 16.

34 Ibid., 17.

discourse or dialogue, they substitute two monologues, each set apart from the other. She, in particular, becomes her own self-parody through her closed linguistic system. In *She*, Albee recreates the woman who so often in his plays lives by the rules of sterile formality. She strives for perfection, order, and specificity in her language.³⁵ Through her rigid use of language, She establishes an emotional distance from her memory, allowing her to maintain control of her narrative. She further describes the evening by expressing how the scent of gardenias, her male date's chosen corsage flower, makes her feel "faintly ill" but nonetheless had to be pinned to her breast as per tradition.³⁶ Her whole evening is thrown into a tailspin, however, when a second date shows up at the prom with another gardenia corsage due to the failure of her previous word choice. When asked earlier by the second date if She would be attending the prom, She responded, "See you!"³⁷ Here, She reflects on the meaning of the phrase and whether it means "something more."³⁸ She's lack of verbal acuity with the opposite sex compounded by her inability to distinguish one suitor from another in her memory reveals her inability to allow herself to fully experience the emotions associated with young love even in retrospect. She concludes her monologue, "I never saw the shy boy again. I have thought about him, though, from time to time, during love."³⁹ She's sexual fantasies about her rebuffed prom date make clear that She distinguishes love from sex not just in the context of her memory but also in her present marriage with He. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a queer theory pioneer, expressed in a 1998 *New York Times* interview, "'Who you have sex with and who you have domesticity with shouldn't necessarily be the same.'"⁴⁰ Albee exposes this dichotomy that exists in He and She's marriage and establishes it as the crux of the play. Furthermore, Kolin affirms that She wants to "separate the past and the present, to keep the emotions of the past from creeping into the present and, most of all, into the future."⁴¹ She's emotional and physical distance from this memory help justify her current need to define terms such as love with He, leaving no room for ambiguity as to what they mean to each other.

35 Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 129.

36 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 17.

37 *Ibid.*, 18.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 19.

40 Dinitia Smith, "'Queer Theory' Is Entering The Literary Mainstream," *New York Times*, January 17, 1998, accessed June 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/17/books/queer-theory-is-entering-the-literary-mainstream.html>.

41 Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 131.

After confronting their personal histories, He and She are back to discussing the symbolic roses in Scene 13 and their fate: to wilt. However, Albee has He change course back to being titillated by his earlier Scene 12-quip, “‘Thousands have lived without love, but none without shirts.’”⁴² In Scene 13, however, He correctly remembers that the original line, as written by W.H. Auden: “‘Thousands have lived without love, but none without water.’”⁴³ He continues by suggesting that most any word could be inserted in place of water. He then repeats She’s earlier list, “Walnuts. Parsley. Bone marrow. Celery root. Crème Brûlée. ‘Thousands have lived without love, but none without Crème Brûlée.’”⁴⁴ In this way, He, too, trivializes love by making it seem less meaningful than a desert rather than the very essence of life, as Auden writes. Sharon D. Spencer writes in “Edward Albee – The Anger Artist,” “Mr. Albee shares deep estrangement from American life, contempt for its values, defiant hostility toward the middle-class American family, an obsession with the sado-masochistic patterns of life in our machine society ... and, finally, a sense of repugnance associated with sex.”⁴⁵ He and She’s breakdown in communication due to their inability to define terms such as love and sex relative to their marriage dooms them to continue to remain isolated from each other, leading to sleeping in separate beds. He, appalled at this unwelcome indication of marital decay, exclaims, “When did *that* happen? When did *that* happen!”⁴⁶ She answers He’s query in the following scene, explaining, “these things happen. We’ve been lucky ... look around you; look at our friends. Sooner or later it happens. Maybe we’ll be lucky and it won’t go any further.”⁴⁷ She’s words are disquieting rather than reassuring to He, for what started as an innocuous exploration of the existence of love in their marriage has now led to the indefinite suspension of their sexual relationship.

Following the blackout in this scene, Albee moves on from queering love, marriage, and sex to queering He and She’s individual identities, when he has them break the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience not as their characters but as actors, revealing who they “really are.” However, as soon as both characters have “identified” themselves, He immediately reverts back to: “Separate rooms ... oh, God ... Where are you going?”⁴⁸ Spencer reflects on Albee’s intention to reveal insights by “expos[ing] ... the various delusions

42 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 18.

43 Ibid., 19.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 136.

46 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 20.

47 Ibid., 23.

48 Ibid.

(sometimes neuroses) which we erect as 'safe' realities, despite their smothering of our emotional and sexual lives."⁴⁹ The building up, tearing down, and retreating to "safe" realities is the process through which He and She have largely conducted their lives, protecting themselves from their depth of feeling or lack thereof. Kolin further identifies that these tactics are methods of "[e]scaping intimacy ... mov[ing] closer toward isolation and death."⁵⁰ Kolin even later refers to He and She as "parallel lines ... [they are] emblems of those things which are irrevocably separate."⁵¹ How can love exist in a marriage described as such, especially now that even sex has been removed from the relationship? He and She have built their marriage on the abstract concepts of love and sex, which they can hardly define, in order to live safe and contented lives. Both favor the known over the unknown, however, as evidenced by their clumsy communication.

What is established in their relationship remains vague, even when it comes to their children. While evidence of a successful, loving heterosexual relationship has long been the bearing of children, when He asks She the number of children they have at the beginning of Scenes 16 through 18, She cannot answer him with certainty. As such, the audience continues to question the status of their marriage. Between She being uncertain of the number and confirming in Scene 18 that they, in fact, have three children, He conducts a monologue beginning with the phrase, "premature grief." He then begins to break down the meaning of this term by confessing to "griev[ing] every day—a little bit—over my *own* death; no time to, for *me*, when it *happens* to me; and I grieve over *her* death, a little, every day, assuming it may happen before mine."⁵² Here, He is preparing himself for the inevitable end of not only his but also She's life cycle. But, is his anticipated grief due to love or simply the loss of the familiar? Despite their questioning of the love that may or may not exist between them, He and She have built a life together and share children. However, long-term togetherness may not necessarily constitute love. He transitions from grief to the topic of semen and masturbation: "those old theories about semen, or 'spunk' as we used to call it? (*Flat, Midwestern accent.*) 'Ya only got a coupla thousand in ya; don't waste it in ya hand."⁵³ Immediately after this sexual turn in his monologue, He then refers again to Auden and his quote about how he would also imagine his "lover's death."⁵⁴ In this parallel, He equates his relationship

49 Spencer, "Edward Albee—The Anger Artist," 137.

50 Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 125.

51 Ibid., 127.

52 Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 26.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

with She to Auden's homosexual relationship with his lover before wondering, "Do you believe ... do you believe the mind and the brain are separate entities?"⁵⁵ He's separation of love and sex in his monologue is analogous to his later separation of the mind and brain. The mind and love are abstracted and indefinable to him while the brain and sex are more concrete, tangible. When She reenters in Scene 18 to confirm her number of children, the audience questions her maternity for this long-delayed response to He's question. Kolin raises the idea that "[o]ne of the symptoms of the dissolution of a marriage is seen in the characters' inability to raise or to respond to questions. The ability to raise such questions is at the core of a successful marriage, according to Albee."⁵⁶ While He does raise the question of their number of children and the mind versus brain, since She's initial question, "Do you *love* me," few answers have been reached.

Scenes 19 and 20 then dissolve back into a series of repetitions about *crème brûlée* and various other food ingredients previously identified as being equal to if not greater than love itself. As in Scene 2, Albee plays with the musical quality of the words and their auditory impact on the audience. Hirsch identifies that while the words themselves may not hold meaning to an audience, for Albee, the "repetition, in itself, *creates meaning*."⁵⁷ She and He converse:

SHE: (*Quite businesslike, if a trifle preoccupied.*)

Walnuts.

Parsley.

Bone marrow.

Celery root.

(*Suspicious.*)

Do you *love* me?

HE: (*Pause, He, too, suspicious.*) Crème Brûlée. What happened to the Crème Brûlée?

SHE: (*Flat.*) There's no Crème Brûlée.

HE: What do you mean there's no Crème Brûlée?

SHE: (*As before.*) There's no Crème Brûlée.

HE: (*Pause.*) There's *always* Crème Brûlée.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 128.

⁵⁷ Foster, *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?*, 91.

SHE: Not today. (*Pause, uncertain.*) Do you love me?

HE: (*Pauses, shrugs, some distaste.*) Sure. (*Pause, not too friendly.*) What happened?⁵⁸

Kolin writes of She's *crème brûlée* dialogue with He, "Her chant—litany, if you will—of these ingredients shows her attempt to harness life forces and reduce them to artificiality, conventionalism."⁵⁹ However, She interrupts the rhythm of dialogue to pose to He yet again: "Do you love me?" While He answers in the affirmative, he immediately wants to know why there is no *crème brûlée*, far more urgently than any of his earlier queries about the presence or lack of love in their marriage. She takes *crème brûlée* off the table just as She removes sex from their marriage. After She finally offers to make a different dessert, raspberry fool, She rephrases her question, "Will you love me?" To which He enthusiastically responds, "You bet!"⁶⁰ However, when She later announces in Scene 20 that there are no raspberries, the only option left for He and She is to revert to the beginning of the play and their questioning of their feelings for each other, signifying a continued dearth of intimacy between them.

In the final scene of the play, He and She continue to debate the question of love and how to concretely identify if it exists between them. He confesses, "I do *love* you, you know. I mean, I'm young enough to make a change if I wanted—start again, fully, without it being substitutive, or anything. I could *do* all that, but I'm not *going* to; I don't even *want* to."⁶¹ When She questions his fidelity, He urges She, "Let well enough alone. If it's well enough ... let it alone."⁶² After so many years together, He concludes that attempting to make a life with someone else, love someone else, would be an exercise in futility. However, when He finally poses the elusive love question to She, She hesitates and responds, "I don't *know*.... I think I do," before the disembodied voice announces, "The End."⁶³

He and She's lives thus return to the echoing hollowness of: Do you love me? Yet, all is not lost in He and She's choice to remain a couple. Adler argues that the true theme of *Counting the Ways* is "the difficulty—the impossibility—of 'counting the ways,' of telling how we love, or even that we love, now that the words we have for expressing things of the heart have been so debased that

⁵⁸ Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 27–28.

⁵⁹ Kolin, "Edward Albee's *Counting the Ways*," 130.

⁶⁰ Albee, *Counting the Ways*, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

they appear no more honest than the shop-worn formulas on greeting cards.”⁶⁴ Albee’s reference to the famous Elizabeth Barrett Browning sonnet “How Do I Love Thee?” is yet another way in which the playwright brings into sharp focus how we, as a society, attempt to make love a quantifiable ideal. Despite He’s literal attempts to “count the ways” through his depetaling ritual, He and She spend the length of the play searching for meaning in the all too familiar terms of marriage, love, and sex. They probe and ponder to find that in Albee’s queering these terms, their once-known word is far more indeterminate than they could have ever imagined. It is not enough for He to simply say He loves She. She wants to know empirically that She is loved, and neither marriage nor sex nor having had children is enough proof for her anymore. In queering love, Albee leaves the characters and audience wanting more, seeking a new word that encompasses the long-term relationship He and She have together. By forcing He and She to engage in intense self-reflection, Albee creates witnesses out of audience members to the deconstruction of an ordinary heterosexual couple’s marriage; they could be anyone. While this couple may have taken for granted that love was at the core of their relationship, by the end of the play, they and the audience are left in new territory where they can be certain of little. In characteristic fashion, Albee shatters the illusions of the few in search of a more precisely defined truth for the many.

64 Adler, “Albee’s 3 1/2,” 60.

Albee Stages Secular Epiphany

Nathan Hedman

Abstract

Edward Albee's recognition scenes can be strange and violent, often carrying the valence of a religious "epiphany." In an epiphany the mental content is often secondary to the embodied, largely inarticulate brush with some other reality. After demonstrating a pattern in such "other realities" in *The Zoo Story*, *Tiny Alice*, and *Seascape*, the author shows how that pattern elucidates how epiphany works in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* The surprising conclusion is that what is principally conveyed through Albeean epiphany is *not* a transcendent reality *per se* (typically a religious project), but rather the opposite: the feeling of being secular, of living within what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls an "immanent frame." A final comparison with Peter Shaffer's *Equus* clearly demonstrates Albee's innovation. While Shaffer represents religious tradition as a meaning-rich foil against an enervated modernity, Albee moves beyond primitivistic nostalgia by deploying religious traditions as a fulcrum to launch characters into immanent, inarticulate ecstasy. The result, however, is a desperate, even tragic loneliness through a shared, secular, immanent frame of reference.

Great changes in artistic style always reflect some alteration in the frontier between the sacred and profane in the imagination of a society.¹

W.H. AUDEN



We should not be surprised that Edward Albee drops a dramaturgical depth charge right in the middle of the traditional recognition scene—that moment when a character comes face-to-face with a reality previously beyond their ken. I use "recognition" advisedly. In the Aristotelian sense of *anagnorisis*, recognition meant a rational discovery, some new information, which culminated in

¹ Auden, *Making, Knowing, and Judging: An Inaugural Letter Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 11 June 1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 31.

a plot reversal. But Albee is after something different than that. Often strange, sometimes violent, these discoveries carry more the valence of a religious experience. Indeed, I will argue, these scenes are better understood under the religious category of an “epiphany.”² While the epiphany *has* mental content, it is secondary to the fully embodied, largely inarticulate experience with some other reality. I’m going to analyze one such moment in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, with quick backward glances to similar moments in *The Zoo Story*, *Tiny Alice*, and *Seascape*, to demonstrate Albee’s ongoing interest in other realities. The surprising conclusion is that what is principally conveyed through Albee—an epiphany is *not* a transcendent reality *per se* (a religious project) but rather the opposite: the feeling of being secular, of living within what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls an “immanent frame.”³ I will briefly summarize the content of that frame, move on to highlight the role “epiphany” plays in the scholarship on the modern novel, and then apply both to what I call Albee’s secular epiphanies. Finally, after a brief comparison with Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, we will see most clearly Albee’s innovation. Specifically, we will see how Shaffer and Albee’s treatment of other religious traditions (particularly Christianity, but also ancient Greek worship) help distinguish their respective projects. Shaffer represents religious traditions as a meaning-rich foil against an enervated

2 The difference between recognition and epiphany in the novel is first clarified in Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1971), 15–16. Beja’s distinctions are developed in Martin Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany: From Wordsworth to Tolstoy, Pater and Barrett Browning* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). Gerald Gillespie, “Epiphany: Notes on the Applicability of a Modernist Term,” in *Sensus Communis: Contemporary Trends in Comparative Literature*, ed. János Reisz, Peter Boerner, and Bernhard Scholz (Tübingen: Narr, 1986). For epiphany in the modernist novel paired with influential twentieth-century social scientists, see Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3 Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593. The ideological critique of western secularity has been growing since the 1960s, especially in the social sciences but hit a high-water mark with the publication of Taylor’s book in 2007. Taylor was trained as a Western philosopher, but has also been politically influential in Canadian politics (making several bids as the social democrat candidate) and wider western debates on modern identity and socio-political inclusion. He demonstrates in a number of important books (*Sources of the Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity* particularly) that self-evident assumptions about the modern self, agency, and ethics are actually the complex accrual of contingent impressions that form the horizon in which modern western identity proceeds. His influence in the philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and political and moral philosophy has been considerable, but with the publication of *A Secular Age*, Taylor gave the most comprehensive intellectual genealogy of secularism to date. Since that time, the scholarship on secularity has advanced in many fields, spreading to literature and the arts. See the growing bibliography below. Ongoing work in religion, secularity, and the public sphere are surveyed and discussed on the website *The Immanent Frame*, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. See <https://tif.ssrc.org/>.

modernity. Albee, on the other hand, no less critical of modern existence, avoids the pitfalls of primitivism by staging a secular epiphany that avoids nostalgia, by moving his characters beyond the grasp of historical religion and modern moral conventions alike. He deploys religious traditions not as a foil but as a fulcrum to launch characters into immanent, inarticulate ecstasy. The result is a desperate, even tragic loneliness, at the same time revealing the modern secular, immanent frame of reference.

It might sound odd that secularism could be a felt reality. Secularity is typically construed as the absence of something, namely religious belief. But this understanding—what Taylor in *A Secular Age* calls a modern subtraction story—conceals that Western secularity has its own history, projects, and sources of the self that, while born out of religious traditions (namely western Judeo-Christianity), nevertheless have become a tradition all its own.⁴ I cannot here summarize Taylor's immensely rich and complicated genealogy of modern Western secularism, how we moved from assuming a transcendent order in 1500 CE to doubting such a thing in the twenty-first century. It must suffice to say that this narrative of secularity culminates in what Taylor calls an "immanent frame" of reference: an historically new, pervasive, and widely shared background from which moderns make sense of the world. I will focus very briefly on just three features of that frame: disenchantment, disembeddedness, and bufferedness.⁵ Taylor regards these as three largely unexamined conditions for the possibility of modern experience. While the immanent frame, Taylor says, can be open to a transcendent order (the religious modern), or resolutely closed to one (the modern materialist), *immanence* remains the background picture from which our claims to transcendence—or our denials of them—are substantiated. And while these features constitute (in part) the modern frame of experience, they are not themselves typically subject to analysis. I will argue that what makes Albee's recognition scenes so remarkable, yet so confounding, is that they suddenly expose these basic features of the secular immanent frame.

A brief word here before my summary. I am not arguing that Albee had any of these theoretical terms in mind as he wrote. No doubt he would balk at

4 "I mean by [subtraction stories] stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

5 "So the buffered [as opposed to "porous"] identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular," Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542. "We come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order; or better a constellation of orders, cosmic, social, and moral ... and these orders are understood as impersonal." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.

anyone carting in abstract terms to “explain” his work. Nevertheless, I will argue that the drawing out of the immanent frame in his dramatic worlds contributes an explanatory power that only deepens as it explains. Moreover, this frame moves beyond one of the critical stand-offs over how to interpret the more difficult moments in his plays. Because the bulk of Albee’s work critiques contemporary existence and its supporting institutions (marriage and parenthood, gender and sexuality roles, capitalism, corporate power, the nation-state, and middle-class morality), the bulk of Albee’s critics remain quite rightly trained on the contemporary issues of his plays. A few, typically older, critics take a more sweeping view, reading Albee into a tradition that addresses the universal condition of being human: the possibility of communication, the relation between the individual and the community, the relation between instinct and intellection, our ethical responsibility to others, the possibility of love.⁶ I would like to propose a third way: beyond understanding Albee as merely a devastating critic of twentieth-century life or as grandly representing the human condition, we might find continuity *and* historical, geographically-local critique if we locate his work within a longer narrative of Western modernity since the sixteenth-century. Bringing to bear the category of “the secular” is one way to do this. So, while I do not assume that Albee’s innovation in these recognition

6 Contemporary criticism in the direction of the former includes the essays in John M. Clum and Cormac O’Brien eds., *Sex, Gender, and Sexualities in Edward Albee’s Plays*, New Perspectives in Edward Albee Studies (Boston: Brill, 2018); John Clum, “Withered Age and stale custom”: Marriage, diminution, and sex in *Tiny Alice*, *A Delicate Balance*, and *Finding the Sun*, and J. Ellen Gainor, “Albee’s *The Goat*: Rethinking Tragedy for the 21st century,” both in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). An early example of contemporary issue criticism can be seen in Michael Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest* (New York: DBS Publications, 1969). Examples of “human condition” criticism can be seen in Ruby Cohn, *Edward Albee* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969); Brian Way, “Albee and the Absurd: *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*,” in *American Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold Limited, 1967); C. W. E. Bigsby, “To the Brink of the Grave: Edward Albee’s *All Over*,” in *Edward Albee*, ed. Bigsby (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Anne Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972). But interesting suggestions of “the human condition” arise in Philip C. Kolin, “Albee’s Early One-Act Plays: ‘A New American Playwright from whom Much is to be Expected,’” in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 17, again, Bigsby, “Better alert than numb’: Albee since the eighties,” and with death and the stages of dying in Brenda Murphy, “Albee’s Threnodies,” both in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*. In the same collection, Michael Roudané’s essay, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow,” nicely captures this dichotomy of interpretative possibility. On the one hand, the play “captures selected public issues of the nation as those issues are registered through the private anxieties of the individual” (Roudané 42). On the other, “Albee is a mythmaker who deconstructs myths,” as George and Martha “progress from performance to being” (Roudané 57).

scenes is a conscious project, I do see him pushing dramaturgical boundaries to find the edges of a western secularity some 500-years old. Or so I will argue.

Being modern is often described as a dialectic of advance and loss—an exhilarating acceleration into the future and simultaneous jettisoning of the past. The battle between science and religion is a succinct symbol of this zero-sum game: we are hurried into an open, liberating future but can't help wondering if the loss of religious or magical modes of being hasn't flattened our experience. The great sociologist Max Weber famously characterized this felt loss as "disenchantment." Taylor borrows this term to help him articulate both the thrill and clarity of scientific progress, as well as the loss of a world once energized with inexplicable mystery and power.

One major effect of a disenchanted universe is that we no longer feel ourselves snugly situated in a God-created, meaning-rich, cosmic hierarchy—the Great Chain of Being—but instead disciplined into a series of new impersonal orders: social, cosmic, and moral. The result is a felt sense of "disembeddedness." Like "disenchantment," disembeddedness carries both negative and positive valences. We are now genuinely free to experiment upon the natural world unconditioned by agencies outside our control. More, we can act upon the world as neutral matter without regard to some secret teleology hidden within. But we can also feel this disembeddedness as a pang of homelessness; the world we inhabit—and the social orders we construct within it—are metaphysically indifferent to our projects and passions. This disembedding was first theorized by the fourteenth-century Nominalists (represented by William of Okham) for theologically orthodox reasons: if God is absolutely free, God must not be finally legible in, and thus conditioned by, Nature. But then all claims to universal "essences" or "forms," including "human nature," are not transcendentally grounded. God's radical freedom from Nature becomes gradually transferred to "the human condition" and reconfigured through various social, political, economic, and scientific ruptures over the centuries. And these natural detachments take on different inflections: "malaise," "alienation," and "existential angst," right down through the twenty-first century.⁷ Both the contemporary exploitation of the environment and the anxiety over its loss are the most recent manifestations of disembeddedness.

Finally, woven with the first two features of modern experience is a third. The fundamental break with the supernatural ("disenchantment") and the natural ("disembeddedness") initiates a picture of the individual as a "buffered" reality, that is, as a closed object among other objects. While pre-moderns assumed

7 There is an immense and growing literature on this history of disembeddedness. The topic and the historiography are briefly glossed in Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 295.

themselves to be “porous,” fundamentally open to external realities (i.e., spirits, stars, vapors, humors), the modern buffered identity imagines the self as atomistic, closed to metaphysical infiltration. The happy result is that most moderns no longer fear the willy-nilly infiltration of black bile or demons, but they may also feel the enervating malaise that comes with never being interfered with, whether for good or evil.

To reiterate: the immanent frame, in Taylor’s understanding, remains genuinely open to the possibility of transcendence.⁸ It’s just that ordered transcendence is no longer the default frame of experience. The claim to transcendence—indeed the very possibility of transcendent experiences—is now understood from within the immanent frame.

Enter the modern epiphany.

As a broader principle of the social sciences, the “secularization thesis” was thought for at least a century to be nothing short of a *fait accompli*. It is commonplace even today to regard secularization as the inevitable consequence of modern Western progress. But in the last forty years, the secularization thesis has undergone major revision by historians, philosophers, and social scientists alike.⁹ Indeed, many scholars today regard pervasive Western-style secularization as colonialism by other means.¹⁰

A similar movement can be discerned within the study of what made art “modern.” Throughout the twentieth century, a reigning assumption was that the *sine qua non* of modern art was its final release from the controlling concept of religion.¹¹ The gods were now not only up for derision, they could be

8 I’m using “transcendence” in the three-fold dimension Taylor uses it: 1) a sense that there is a calling beyond mere human flourishing; 2) a sense that this calling issues from a power or agency beyond our immanent existence; and 3) that this reality extends our lives beyond mere birth and death. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

9 What we even mean by “secularization” is up for grabs: individual loss of belief in the supernatural? A slackening religious service attendance? Public spaces shorn of religious discourse? Conscious awareness of the great diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs and practices? Whatever the definition, most scholars of the secular today now regard it as neither so tidy nor as ineluctable as once assumed. See Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Michael Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, “Editor’s Introduction” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

10 Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

11 The novel is “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.” Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 88.

simply ignored. "And what remains when disbelief has gone?" as Philip Larkin asks in his perspicacious "Church Going."¹² Realism in particular, and its fully-fledged vehicle, the novel, might go four-hundred pages tracking "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day," as Virginia Woolf suggests, without requiring some supernatural hypothesis to frame its meaning.¹³

Something of this story is true in modern novels, poetry, and drama alike, especially when that writing tips into realism, as Albee's does.¹⁴ But as Pericles Lewis' study of the high modernist novel makes clear, quite against expectation of the secularization thesis, religion did not fizzle out.¹⁵ If anything, the modernist novel became a fresh zone to work out many of the same questions heretofore taken up by religion, in what Lewis calls the new "secular sacred."¹⁶ The great Lionel Trilling himself evinced that "No literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours."¹⁷ But the distinction between "religion" and "spirituality" tends to obscure as much as it clarifies. It makes clear rhetorically that one's spiritual experiences are personal, not finally beholden to any traditional religious system. But it often obscures a deeper truth: that the form and content of the modern "secular sacred" may be as traditionally "religious" as ever (including its deeply personal nature). Indeed, the language for such experiences is often borrowed straight across from religious traditions. The epiphany, Lewis argues along with others, became an important way for modern novelists to represent the experience of secular insight in the ordinary; but it trailed behind it the older clouds of religious affection, discovery, mystery, and meaning. The essential difference here was not that religion had been subtracted from modern art but that its content had been privatized and the interpretation of spiritual experience self-authorized. Thus, Lewis argues, epiphanies in the modernist novel "do not necessarily imply a rejection of all religion, but rather a transfer of authority in religious belief from public to private hands."¹⁸

12 Larkin, "Church Going," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1989), 97–98.

13 Quoted in Lewis, *Religious Experience*, 22.

14 Lewis claims that the historical does make some sense of the novel as the historical vehicle of literary realism, whereas poetry, in both form and content, flirts longer and more explicitly with religious sensibility: "Perhaps because its characteristic concerns are sociological or anthropological rather than spiritual, the novel tends to approach the sacred more obliquely than poetry; it has more in common with a treatise than a rite," 4. Lewis' suggestion for poetry here is suggestive for drama, especially in regard to ritual. See below.

15 Lewis, *Religious Experience*, 19, 23–43.

16 *Ibid.*, 21.

17 Quoted in Lewis, *Religious Experience*, 5.

18 Lewis, *Religious Experience*, 21.

The spiritual-but-not-religious designation indicates this distinction but belies a deeper continuity with historic, socially-structured beliefs and practices.

Epiphanies in the novel are construed as both private and mundane. (Think in short-hand here about Joyce's eponymous protagonist in *Stephen Hero* who considers collecting "epiphanies" in a book, including the mundane event of looking at a clock.)¹⁹ But for this reason the scholarship on modern epiphany remains exclusive to *literary* representation, particularly the novel and the short story. For example, outside of Greek drama, there is virtually no discussion of the epiphanic in modern drama.²⁰ Instead, the pervasive use of religious language and imagery in modern Western drama typically has scholars focused on modern ritual.²¹ Albee's dramaturgy, for example, has received such ritual analysis, and I make use of it below.²² But such analysis, borrowing models from sociology and anthropology, tends to default to a kind of formalism without local historical or religious content.

The Albeean epiphany has both form and content that is especially instructive in the discourse on secularization and modern art. His consistent establishment of a realistic frame is punctured, often brutally so, by a reality beyond

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- 19 "By an epiphany he [Stephen Hero] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. ... Imagine my glimpse at the clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust the vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised." Quoted in Gerald Gillespie, "Epiphany: Notes on the Applicability of a Modernist Term," in Riesz, Boerner, and Scholz, *Sensus Communis*, 255. This mundane form of epiphany is more difficult to capture on stage.
 - 20 A remarkable and brief exception appears in Roudané's explication of Nick's "epiphanic moment of comprehension minutes before the play [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*] ends—"JESUS CHRIST I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!" in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 55. This claim is suggestive of the argument I'm making about epiphany in this essay, but must remain undeveloped here.
 - 21 For example, Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892–1992*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993); Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996); Katherine Burkman, *The Arrival of Godot: Ritual Patterns in Modern Drama* (Vancouver, BC: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986); Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Ritual* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). Peter Nesteruk, "Ritual and Identity in Late Twentieth-Century American Drama," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring, 2005): 43–70.
 - 22 Rictor Norton, "Folklore and Myth in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," *Renascence* 23 (1971): 159–167; Nelvin Vos, "The Process of Dying in the Plays of Edward Albee," *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 (1973): 80–85; Harry Langdon, "Ritual Form: One Key to Albee's *Tiny Alice*," *Theatre Annual* 35 (1980): 57–72; Mary Castigle Anderson, "Ritual and Initiation in *The Zoo Story*," in *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, ed. Julian Wasserman (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1983). Richard Dutton, "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* By Edward Albee," in his *Modern Tragicomedy and the British Tradition* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986); Murphy, Roudané, and Bigsby similarly all have recourse to "ritual" to help make their arguments in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*.

the characters' awareness. We see the earliest intimation of this in Jerry's long, *Goat*-anticipating story about the large, black, "almost always" erect dog in *The Zoo Story*. Jerry portrays himself utterly bereft of social connection and decides to establish an "understanding" with the mysterious, threatening dog. In fact, Jerry sees himself as just one object within a world of objects, any one of with which he wishes he could initiate "an understanding." In a manifesto-worthy passage on modern disembeddedness, Jerry intones:

Don't you see? A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. With a bed, with a cockroach, with a mirror ... no, that's too hard, that's one of the last steps. With a cockroach, with a ... with a ... with a carpet, a roll of toilet paper ... no not that, either ... that's a mirror, too; always check bleeding. You see how hard it is to find things? With a street corner, and too many lights, [... finally] with God who, I'm told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago ... with ... some day, with people. [...] Where better to make a beginning ... to understand and just possibly be understood ... a beginning of an understanding, than with ... (*here JERRY seems to fall into almost grotesque fatigue*) ... than with a DOG. Just that; a dog.²³

Jerry fails precisely where Martin (of *The Goat*) will ultimately, ecstatically, succeed. But in Jerry's final murder/suicide there is nevertheless a brief, epiphanic glimpse of the possibility of connection, even if just a split-second "understanding" between two creatures in a zoo. The knife having punctured his chest, Jerry delivers a dizzying array of insights, most of them opaque, but nevertheless bearing the marks of an epiphany of an ulterior reality. At their conclusion, Jerry is eased into his death in a relaxed posture of detached gratefulness.

(*JERRY is dying; but now his expression seems to change. His features relax, and while his voice varies, sometimes with pain, for the most part he seems removed from his dying. He smiles*). Thank you, Peter. I mean that now; thank you very much.²⁴

A similar death scene concludes the most overtly religious of all of Albee's plays, *Tiny Alice*. It also happens to be one of the most perplexing; so, while

23 Albee, *The Zoo Story and The Sandbox*, revised ed. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1999), 16–21. The anadrome God/Dog plays nicely in this passage linguistically and thematically. Albee rehearses the history of disembeddedness: with the back-turning of God initiated "some time ago," modern identity came gradually into being through the disassociation with the world of objects.

24 *Ibid.*, 28.

we can't do justice to the play's mysterious metaphysics, we can nevertheless discern a similar structure of immanent epiphany. It is foreshadowed at the end of the second act when Julian, a lay brother—“mildly troubled” for a period when his faith had left him—explains his adolescent thrall to martyrdom. “*Becoming quite by himself during this* [story],” Albee has Julian recall his youthful study of the ancient Romans persecuting the Christians, how they “like enraged children gutting their teddy bears,” sent gladiators and lions into the coliseum to kill them for sport.²⁵

I could ... I could entrance myself, and see the gladiator on me, his trident fork against my neck, and hear, even hear, as much as feel, the prongs as they entered me; the ... the beast's saliva, dripping from the yellow teeth, the slack sides of the mouth, the sweet warm breath of the lion; great paws on my spread arms ... even the rough leather of the pads; and to the point of ... as the great mouth opened, the breath no longer warm but hot, the fangs on my jaw and forehead, positioned ... IN. And as the fangs sank in, the great tongue on my cheek and eye, the splitting of the bone, and the *blood* ... just before the great sound, the coming dark and the silence. I could ... experience it all. And was ... engulfed.²⁶

Especially impressive is the way this moment balances at the edge of a fully embodied erotic-religious ecstasy. The elision between divine transcendence and sexual ecstasy has a long tradition in Christian mysticism, as Albee well knows, but here he pushes it horizontally to include women, men, objects, and animals: the feel of rough leather pads, wet tongue and sweet hot breath, the sound of puncturing, crushing, dripping, and splitting; the rush of blood that runs down and “bathes my groin.”²⁷ Man and beast particularly conflate here in a more explicit but similar way as Peter and the Dog in *The Zoo Story*. But unlike Jerry's epiphany, Julian's continues with expressly Christian content: “The ... death of the saints ... was always the beginning of their lives. To go blood-stained and worthy ... upward. I could feel the blood on my robes as I went; the

25 Albee, *Tiny Alice*, revised ed. (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1999). All quotations from the play are from this edition.

26 Ibid., 65.

27 Ruby Cohn has a suggestive way to read this collapse: “In *Tiny Alice* dimensions are deliberately diffused and confused; one does not move, as in the Great Chain of Being, from an animal dimension, to a human, to angelic, to divine. Rather, all dimensions are interactive, and point to the whole metaphysical mystery in its private parts.” Cohn, *Edward Albee*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 33.

smell of the blood as intense as paint ... and warm ... and painless.”²⁸ After this “upward” journey, Julian approaches the divine with these words: “You see? I have come ... blood-stained and worthy.”²⁹ In Christian theology, this approach was figured in the Book of Revelation as the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, the marriage between Christ and his bride, the Church.³⁰ Albee has cleverly invited that matrimonial image into this curtain-closing scene through Miss Alice, who, the audience knows, has been trying to seduce Julian throughout his story. She follows Julian’s words of celestial arrival here with “Marry me,” and the act ends with a very literal enfolding of Julian into the wing-like arms of Miss Alice. Divine union is completed within a recognizably Christian idiom (“Oh my God in heaven ... ,” etc.) and imagery (blood, sacrifice, marriage, and martyrdom). But we soon learn that Miss Alice is standing in for the “real” Alice, Tiny Alice, who beckons Julian from beyond, or, more appropriately, *within*. In a peak of mystical ecstasy, Miss Alice throws her head back and calls out the name of the actual, surveilling deity in this world: “Alice! Alice?” Apparently, Julian’s childhood dream-trance, for all its promise of divine union, and notwithstanding the powerfully erotic account of Christian martyrdom, has not yet “arrived.” Christian theology will play prologue to secular epiphany.

Epiphany occurs in an immanent registrar in the final act of *Tiny Alice*. And when it does, those final minutes transpose an already enigmatic play into deeply ambiguous illumination. Like Jerry, Julian is thrust into an ulterior reality through violent penetration—this time a bullet to the chest from the gun of the devious Lawyer. But unlike Jerry, and much more dramatically, the audience is made to feel and hear the presence of this reality, even when, initially, Julian cannot. After his abandonment, Julian, bleeding from the gun shot, pleads: “Alice? ... God? SOMEONE? Come to Julian as he ... ebbs.” Then the audible approach of something both human and extra-human: “(*We begin to hear it now, faintly at first, slowly growing, so faintly at first it is subliminal: The heartbeat ... thump thump ... thump thump ... And the breathing ... the intake taking one thump thump, the exhaling the next. Julian neither senses nor hears it yet, however.*)” This is a curious choice. The sound appears to be responding to Julian’s appeal for “SOMEONE?” but begins only in the audience’s hearing. Is it manifesting Julian’s inner anxiety in the throes of death? Does it suggest the

28 Ibid., 65.

29 Ibid., 66.

30 Revelation 19:6–9. Albee later folds this Christian bridegroom image seamlessly into Sappho’s famous Greek line, “Raise high the roofbeam, for the bridegroom comes” (89). Cohn discerns a similar “classico-Christian” confluence in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 26, which we will also see in *The Goat*.

actual, objective coming of “the presence” before even Julian is aware of it? It continues until Julian himself becomes aware of it:

You ... thou ... art ... coming to me? Art coming to me? How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? [...] (*The breathing and heartbeats are much, much louder now.*) [...] O Lord, my God, I have awaited thee, have served thee in thy ... ALICE? (*His arms are wide, should resemble a crucifixion.*) ALICE? ... GOD? (*The sounds are deafening.*) I accept thee Alice, for thou art come to me. God, Alice ... I accept thy will (*Sounds continue. Julian dies. Sounds continue thusly: thrice after death ... thump thump thump thump thump thump. Absolute silence for two beats. The lights fade to black.*)³¹

That sound cue—“*The sounds are deafening*”—imagines an audience enduring a terribly overwhelming experience of aural engulfment. Julian’s final pose of crucified resignation, that quintessentially Christian pose, embodies an acceptance of the one who comes in death. But unlike Julian’s earlier martyr-dream which moves “upward,” this crucifixion remains immanent, acquiescing to a god with a new, earthy, Anglo-Saxon name: “Alice.” It doesn’t, for that, lose its aural power (interestingly, the “thumps” continue after Julian’s death), but it stages the power without the transcendence, that is, without an “up.” And it uses Christianity’s idiom and iconography as theological leverage to do so. It is also the “more real” epiphany; it partakes more substantively in an ulterior reality than when Julian was being duped by Miss Alice. And it translates that earlier epiphany into a thoroughly secular one. But unlike the Christian narrative, there is not another soul around to see it, only the audience. As we will see, isolation will remain a key feature of the secular epiphany.

In similar if gentler tones, a brush with ulterior reality is suggested in *Seascape*. Charlie and Nancy, a newly-retired couple, relaxing at the beach, wrangle over what their new future will look like. Nancy imagines a life hopping from beach to beach collecting new experiences. But Charlie complains that he’s done moving around: he wants to wile the days away doing nothing. “We’ve earned a little rest,” he intones.³² This standoff, with Nancy pushing outward and Charlie reluctantly holding back, is apparently old territory for them. It’s poignantly staged with the beach acting as a liminal ecosystem between water and earth, and humanity’s crawl out of the ocean posing the question: what *does* it mean to evolve? We learn that there are false easy answers. “Up” is not

31 Ibid., 90.

32 Albee, *Seascape*, revised ed. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), 8. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

always better, for example. Throughout the play, the menacing sounds of jet planes zooming dangerously overhead (like *Tiny Alice*'s "deafeningly loud," but without the spiritual inference) break up an otherwise tranquil setting. "Progress is a set of assumptions," Charlie quips.³³ Similarly, the sea "below" is construed as an inviting underworld. Nancy, in an attempt to reinvigorate Charlie's youthful sense of adventure, prods him to remember those solitary moments when, as a kid of "twelve or thirteen," he was enticed under water. The episode begins in beautiful isolation at the edge of the sea: "I used to lie on the warm boulders," moves to sexual discovery, "[...] strip off ... (*Quiet, sad amusement*) ... learn about my body; no one saw me," and then, a decisive plunge into an ulterior reality.

And I would go into the water, take two stones, as large as I could manage, swim out a bit, tread, look up one final time at the sky ... relax ... begin to go down. Oh, twenty feet, fifteen, soft landing without a sound, the white sand clouding up where your feet touch, and all around you ferns [...] and lichen. You can stay down there so long! You can build it up and last ... so long, enough for the sand to settle and the fish come back.³⁴

In this moment, Charlie wistfully remembers the pleasure of embeddedness. The seabed is sensually alive, welcoming (where he drops to when he "relaxes") yet utterly enchanting. He remains until his status as an "intruder" evaporates and he is received as a fellow sea creature.

And they do—come back, all sizes, some slowly, eye-ing past; some streak, and you think for a moment they're larger than they are, sharks, maybe, but they never are, and one stops being an intruder, finally—just one more object come to the bottom, or living thing, part of the undulation and the silence. It was very good.³⁵

Nancy doesn't get it, exactly, but it's fascinating. She wonders if the fish talked with him or nibbled his toes. Charlie admits that some of them did.

The structure of this epiphanic memory resonates backward to *The Zoo Story* and *Tiny Alice*, and forward to *The Goat*, but in a softer register. The sexual awakening on the boulders is explicit but continues as metaphor: Charlie sinks to the bottom with two big stones to "build it up, and last ... so long" until he

33 Ibid., 53.

34 Ibid., 11.

35 Ibid.

becomes engulfed, a “part of the undulation,” and the fish recognize him as a fellow creature and “nibble his toes.” The danger of death is immanent but seductively muted; to stay down there would be to drown in both a real and metaphorical sense. But unlike previous epiphanies, the traditionally religious overtones are nearly absent. That Charlie dipped into a period of melancholy for seven months (what Nancy called his “seven-month decline”)³⁶ is suggestively echoed in Sarah (the visiting lizard’s) guess that she’s laid “seven thousand” eggs in her lifetime.³⁷ There is here the barest suggestion that Albee is playing with Genesis creation numbers, where seven equals rest, completion, and perfection. Perhaps that is why Charlie finishes this epiphanic memory with God’s cosmic verdict on the seventh day after the creation: “It was very good.” Time to rest, thinks Charlie.

But, of course, to rest would be death. And, indeed, the play inches away from Charlie’s nostalgic dream and toward Nancy’s onward yearnings: “I think the only thing to do is to *do* something.”³⁸ But while she might be an optimist, she agrees with Charlie that being human isn’t necessarily “better” than being an animal—that is, some higher rung on the Great Chain of Being. Only that it is more “interesting”: “I use tools, I make art ... (*Turning introspective*) ... and I’m aware of my own mortality.”³⁹ Both the metaphor and reality of evolution allow her to imagine advancement without transcendence; all accounts of advancement remain within the immanent field. But aside from her brief (seven-day) flirtation with divorce, we never get to hear what might constitute a fully embodied epiphany for Nancy. That possibility, in one of Albee’s ingenious turns, is handed to two lizards, Sarah and Leslie, who, near the end of the first act, emerge from the sea. Together, they initiate what epiphany might look like from below. The animal world has now crossed the boundary into the ulterior reality of human fellowship and discovered a range of possibilities (not all pleasant) heretofore unknown to the animal kingdom. In a radical departure, their epiphany is conducted, albeit agonistically, with others. Near the end of the play, after discovering the pain of loss and death, Leslie and Sarah decide to abandon the land of the humans and return to the sea. But Nancy pleads with them, even intimates a kind of inevitability to their evolution: “You’ll have to come back ... sooner or later.”⁴⁰ With Nancy’s outstretched hand, Leslie and Sarah agree to go on. Not “up,” *per se*, but onward. The gentle, even kind suggestion is that for all the pain of it, return spells death.

36 Ibid., 13.

37 Ibid., 37.

38 Ibid., 9.

39 Ibid., 53.

40 Ibid., 56.

Intriguingly, Albee originally wrote a middle act for *Seascape* staged on the ocean floor, with Sarah and Leslie reintroducing Charlie and his wife to the underworld. It is difficult to imagine. In fact, it was scuttled after the first rehearsal due to “staging problems,”⁴¹ but it shows Albee desiring to attempt a full staging of an ulterior reality. So far Albee’s epiphanies come as memory, suggestive dictations, or the briefest flash of light and sound. They tend to be curtain closers, not full acts.

So how does the Albeean epiphany fit into the current scholarship in modern literature and theatre? In contrast to the scholarship on epiphany in the novel, Albee’s epiphanies are neither private nor mundane, but *public* and *extraordinary*. They are initiated through a rupture, often violently so, and they suggest a reality both beautiful and harrowing. In contrast to the theatre scholarship, these epiphanies are not exclusively, or even predominately, the result of ritual. Albee certainly works in patterns and repetitions—even explicitly borrowing traditional rituals in some cases⁴²—but the point of these is what they *reveal*, not merely their ritualistic structure. Put differently, what Albee’s epiphanies demonstrate is not the ahistorical human quest common of ritual scholarship, but a historically-contingent, socially-construed search for a ulterior reality, instigated through secularized, immanent epiphany.

As we’ve established, Taylor thinks experience of the transcendent is possible within the immanent frame, but now the frame (specifically disenchantment, disembeddedness, and bufferedness) constitutes the conditions for the possibility of that experience. We are now in a strong position to apply this consistent structure of epiphany to *The Goat*. More, we will discover that similar strategies by another lauded modern playwright do not generate the same results. Specifically, my argument below is that while we see a similar structure of epiphany in both Shaffer’s *Equus* and Albee’s *Goat*, in Albee’s hands, the performance of the immanent epiphanic uniquely reveals the secular immanent frame with devastating consequences.

Martin and Stevie Gray are a recognizable mainstay in Albee’s dramatis personae: a white, upper-class, well-educated, liberal couple who occupy their Upper East Side loft in the first act of *The Goat*. They love each other but also trade in those acerbic witticisms meant to protect themselves in their vulnerability. Martin, soft-spoken, a bit forgetful, is the Pritzker-winning architect at the apex of an enviable career, while Stevie maintains her support as a fiercely

41 Barbara Horn, “Edward Albee: A Research and Production Sourcebook,” in *Modern Dramatists Research and Production Sourcebooks* 19 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 61.

42 Most famously Catholic exorcism, the mass for the dead, and Walpurgisnacht in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

proud wife. The image of modern success is soon troubled by the intimation of an affair. But the image is utterly shattered when we learn that the female Martin is carrying on with is a goat. Martin prepares Stevie for this discovery through exceedingly ironic admissions early on, but the discovery nevertheless lands like a bomb. Albee allows the dialogue to linger in the awkward, unseemly features of Martin's dalliance for several minutes. These are made all the more difficult in the almost laughable way he characterizes his tryst.

MARTIN: (*Slow; deliberate*) And what I felt was ... it was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It was so ... amazing. There she was. [...] She was looking at me with those eyes of hers and ... I melted, I think. I think that's what I did: I melted.

STEVIE: (*Hideous enthusiasm*) You melted!!

MARTIN: (*Waves her off*) I'd never seen such an expression. It was pure ... and trusting and ... and innocent; so ... so guileless.⁴³

In the modern, middle class morality scene, bestiality connotes the darkest kink. But Martin veritably gushes that what he has found with Sylvia is a kinship of the greatest spiritual purity. Stevie tartly expresses her—and our—incredulity. But Martin remains strangely obtuse. His description of the affair deepens toward the epiphanic. Kneeling before Sylvia, looking into her eyes, Martin reaches for the inarticulate:

Listen to me. It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it ... took me with it, and it was ... an ecstasy and a purity, and a ... love of a ... (*dogmatic*) un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing *whatever*; to nothing that can be *related* to! Don't you see!? Don't you see the ... don't you see the "thing" that happened to me? What nobody understands?⁴⁴

Martin refuses to be embarrassed; he insists we listen to what we find hard to believe. He knows the relationship is difficult to understand, but he never apologizes for his behavior. Quite the opposite: he ascribes to it a kind of beauty—even *moral* beauty ("purity," "innocence")—that sounds ridiculous.

I knelt there, eye level, and there was a ... a what!? ... an understanding so intense, so natural ... [...] that I will *never* forget it [...] And there was a

43 Albee, *The Goat, or, Who is Sylvia?* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), 39.

44 Ibid.

connection there—a communication—that, well, ... an epiphany, I guess comes closest, and I knew what was going to happen.⁴⁵

Albee is nothing if not precise. The structure of Martin's experience here—the approach from a radical outside (“alien”), its overwhelming power, the subsequent journey unrelated to mundane space and time (“took me with it”), the incommensurate reality with all previous experience (“relates to nothing *whatever*”), the loss of language to express it, the height of bliss (“ecstasy”), and the unadulterated goodness of the experience (“purity,” “innocence,”) all outline a traditionally religious experience of epiphany. As mentioned with *Tiny Alice*, the elision between divine transcendence and sexual euphoria has a long tradition in Christian mysticism. Martin doubles-down on the ineluctable nature of the experience, how it crushes agency, doubt, self-consciousness, in the (goat-)face of pure love:

Epiphany! And when it happens there's no retreating, no holding back. I put my hands through the wires of the fence and she came toward me, slipped her face between my hands, brought her nose to mine at the wires ... and nuzzled.⁴⁶

Martin's tale of discovery ends with the declaration of an epiphany of the highest order. And as he recounts it, the audience—along with Stevie—are forced into a kind of invocational liturgy. Albee punctuates Martin's epiphany with a series of literal breaks, dramatized not by Martin, but by Stevie. As Martin descends into detail, passing through boundaries—into the country, through the goat eyes, wire fences—Stevie overturns, throws, or drops to the floor accoutrements, materially shattering the well-ordered facade of modern life. One by one, Stevie tips over chairs, paintings, vases, the contents of a bookcase, finally shouting:

That you can do these two things [make love to Sylvia and Stevie] ... and not understand how it ... SHATTERS THE GLASS!!?? How it cannot be dealt with—how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? and how I am destroyed? How *you are*?⁴⁷

45 Ibid., 40.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 44.

So closes the second scene—with Stevie slamming the door as she exits with a vow to bring him down with her, leaving Martin to open the third and final scene in a setting of a modern destruction: “*An hour or so later. Martin is sitting in the ruins.*”⁴⁸

Martin’s epiphany has blown up the safe, anodyne reality of modern secular life. This is nothing new; it might even serve as a functional definition of modern dramatic realism itself. The breaking of taboos is a much-cherished modern dramatic device, and if that was all Albee was hoping to accomplish it would be far from innovative. But unlike the all-but-cliché modern affair where lust and malaise scuttle once-earnest vows, Martin’s scandal shatters at a much deeper level. It reveals an absence at the heart of secular existence—can we agree on what constitutes community? This question ushers us into a deeper one: can we agree on what constitutes our shared modern reality? Secular epiphanies put these very big questions to Albee’s audience, raising the question of whether moderns have the resources to answer them.

Interpretations of the bestiality in *The Goat* have proliferated. Some critics see in it a loose analogy for sexual transgression in general, as a literal treatment of bestiality and challenge to liberal tolerance, or as an exposé of the arbitrariness of all moral conventions.⁴⁹ More specifically, Deborah Bailin interprets the play as a study of characters who “lose the power to affirm their humanity by losing their power of words”;⁵⁰ Joy Huang discerns in it an analysis of “our perception of the Self/human analysis versus the Other/non-human”;⁵¹ Michael Wagoner takes “Notes *toward*” in the subtitle literally: as a demonstrated “inability to come to terms with a goal of defining tragedy.”⁵² Kuhn, interestingly, sees the goat affair as a “religious experience,”⁵³ but his reading of the play is a scattered account of Greek and Christian resonances that do not finally cohere. The goat represents a “sylvan deity” and Martin plays the protagonist who “presumes that he could not have chosen to do wrong

48 Ibid.

49 These are nicely glossed in Phyllis T. Dircks, *Edward Albee: A Literary Companion* (McFarland, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2010), 63.

50 Deborah Bailin, “Our Kind: Albee’s Animals in *Seascape* and *The Goat, or, Who is Sylvia?*” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 18, no. 1 (2006): 12.

51 Quoted in Tony Jason Stafford, “Edward Albee and the Pastoral Tradition,” in *Edward Albee and Absurdism*, ed. Michael Bennett, *New Perspectives in Edward Albee Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 97.

52 Michael Wagoner, “The Limits of the Goat Song in Edward Albee’s *The Goat: or Who is Sylvia?*” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no. 2 (2017): 311.

53 John Kuhn, “Getting Albee’s Goat: Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy,” *American Drama* 13, no. 2 (2004): 9.

[like any Greek hero because] he is blind to any wrongness of his action.”⁵⁴ Most illuminating is Ellen J. Gainor’s interpretation, both wide-ranging and acute. Gainor wisely refuses the either/or of a literal or metaphorical interpretation of the goat affair. Indeed, she argues that one of Albee’s dramaturgical developments since *Seascape* has been the “heightened tension between reality and metaphor” that characterizes his work.⁵⁵ Moreover, she denies any final dichotomy between domestic drama and political play by demonstrating how Albee’s “perennial concern with the dysfunctional American family” turns into “a more politicized exploration of some profound and far-reaching questions for the Western dramatic tradition and modern civilization itself.”⁵⁶

This rather grand phrasing is of a piece with my own argument. It asks the viewer to take seriously the possibility that even though *The Goat* feels shockingly fresh, it has in its critical sights a long view of modernity. For example, Gainor ingeniously reads the selection of Martin to design a twenty-seven billion dollar World City of the future, “financed by U.S. electronics technology and rising out of the wheatfields of our middle west,” as a modern Oz absurdly rising out of the plains.⁵⁷ She wonders, rightly I think, whether Albee doesn’t have in mind a Nietzschean critique of modern progress, built on the sclerotic back of rationalism, utilitarianism, and optimism, that “great optimistic-rationalist-utilitarian victory, together with democracy, its political contemporary,” which, Nietzsche argues, “was at bottom nothing other than a symptom of declining strength.”⁵⁸ As Gainor knows, Nietzsche is a killer diagnostician of modern hubris, but he traces that long history (perhaps dubiously) back to the Greeks. In nearly every example of modern critique, Gainor relies on critics with a long view—Lukacs’ on the threat of nature under capitalism,⁵⁹ Descartes’ on the animal-human split in the soul,⁶⁰ Kincaid’s study on Victorian representations of innocent childhood,⁶¹ even Michael Feingold’s theatre history of marital infidelity (at least since 1840)⁶²—together tracing an extended, complicated development of modernity. And as a point of historical contrast,

54 Ibid., 29.

55 Gainor, “Albee’s the Goat,” 205.

56 Ibid., 203.

57 Ibid., 206. There is an interesting connection here to Paul Nathanson’s analysis of American secularity in *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, McGill Studies in the History of Religions (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

58 Quoted in Ibid.

59 Ibid., 209.

60 Ibid., 210.

61 Ibid., 213.

62 Ibid., 211.

she, like Ruby Cohn, points to Tillyard's formulation of The Great Chain of Being that for so long ordered pre-modern life: "This fundamental disjunction in the couple's understandings of their place in the natural world—this essential conflict between ideas of a hierarchy of life and of an equality of life—thereby alters the theoretical horizon for drama, which heretofore has posited the relationships among men as paramount."⁶³ Modernity is long in coming; only its insistence on rupture and acceleration creates the sense that it arrived today.

I now offer a significant strand to that longer story: Albee's epiphanies cut to the heart of the modern secular project by revealing the collapse of the Great Chain of Being, and in its place an immanent frame that produces the modern disenchanted, disembedded, and buffered self. But precisely because of this frame, Martin's affair posits an "outside" source of beauty and morality, a "porous self" primed for "enchantment," *not* accessed through religious tradition but in an as yet alien unthinkable, immanent elsewhere.

For those acquainted with Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, the structure of Martin's experience will sound exceedingly similar. The characters and perspectives have switched roles—in *Equus* the adult man looks in at the life of aberrant sexuality and *envies* what he sees—but the structure of the epiphany is the same. Alan, a troubled teen whose restrictive religious upbringing has distorted his "normal" sexual drives, has recently been arrested for gouging out the eyes of six horses under his care. He has been sent to Dysart, the eminently competent child psychiatrist, to discover what motivated this terrible act. Dysart learns that Alan has been performing a complex ritual in which he rides a horse naked through the night until their consummation. Through one of his psychiatric "tricks," Dysart gets Alan to reenact the scene that begins in his bedroom, kneeling before the image of the horse-god Equus:

DYSART: You're looking at Equus from the foot of your bed. Would you like to kneel down?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: [*encouragingly*] Go on, then.

Alan kneels.

Now tell me. Why is Equus in chains?

ALAN: For the sins of the world.

DYSART: What does he say to you?

ALAN: "I see you." "I will save you."

DYSART: How?

ALAN: "Bear you away. Two shall be one."

63 Ibid., 214.

DYSART: Horse and rider shall be one beast?

ALAN: One person!⁶⁴

They quickly imagine a move to the stable—"The Holy of Holies"—where, after a kind of ritual ablution of washing and brushing, Equus speaks to Alan:

DYSART: And there he spoke to you, didn't he? He looked at you with his gentle eyes, and spake unto you?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: What did he say? 'Ride me?' 'Mount me, and ride me forth at night'?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: And you obeyed?

ALAN: Yes.

The ceremony continues, worked out in a private ritual patterned after the language and myth of the Hebrew Bible in which Alan was long saturated. What's striking here are the similarities to Martin's epiphany: the kneeling, the gaze into the eyes, the unspoken speech, the subsequent journey unrelated to mundane space and time, the incommensurate reality with all previous experience, the loss of language, the height of bliss, and the unadulterated goodness. All these map precisely onto Martin's experience. If anything, Shaffer takes even more care to fit Alan's experience within an explicitly religious pattern befitting Alan's Christian upbringing. More, the final outcome is the same as Martin's: loving unification with a radical other. So, Alan concludes his epiphany:

Feel me on you! *On you! On you! On you!*

I want to be *in* you!

I want to BE you forever and ever! –

Equus, I love you!

Now!–

Bear me away!

Make us One Person!⁶⁵

He travels thus to the "Land of Ha Ha" where consummation is made complete.

The similarity between Alan's affinity with Equus and Martin's with Sylvia is obvious. Alan has lost control of the conventions associated with a modern

64 Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 64.

65 Ibid.

identity. His epiphany has moved him out of the immanent frame of the disenchanted, disembedded, and buffered self into a zone of the unknown, giving him an experience (“one night every three weeks”⁶⁶) of an enchanted, embedded, and porous self.

As a psychiatrist, Dysart has the modern tools to explain Alan’s aberrant behavior, perhaps to “cure” him of it, but he worries whether these tools are not at the very root of his own modern sickness. To cure Alan, to make him “normal,” would be to take away the very thing that gives him access to a form of life out of reach for moderns. Dysart, turning a critical eye toward himself, complains that he has nothing in his life that has required his surrender, nothing that commands his worship.

What worship has *he* ever known? Real worship! Without worship you shrink, it’s as brutal as that ... I shrank my *own* life. No one can do it for you. I settled for being pallid and provincial, out of my own eternal timidity.⁶⁷

In contrast to Alan’s secret ritual, Dysart has become painfully aware of the enervating effect of the modern immanent frame. Against this backdrop of a weak, sexually-neutered reality, with no god to worship and no consuming passion, Alan’s nighttime rides full of power and communion look like a secret communique from an ulterior reality. Dysart admits that Alan’s violent act against the horses is troubling, but his “sickness” says at least as much about the nature of modern reality as it does about his pathologies.

DYSART: All right, he’s sick. He’s full of misery and fear. He was dangerous, and could be again, though I doubt it. But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it.

HESTHER: You can’t.

DYSART: [*vehemently*] Don’t you see? That’s the Accusation! That’s what his stare has been saying to me all this time. “*At least I galloped! When did you?*” ... [*simply*] I’m jealous Hesther. Jealous of Alan Strang.⁶⁸

We recognize in Alan’s epiphany the same qualities of Martin’s, first through Alan’s own reenactment, then through Dysart’s query from the outside looking

66 Ibid., 65.

67 Ibid., 81.

68 Ibid., 80–81.

in. While this representation of religious experience is not unusual in modern drama, it has rarely been so clearly, agonizingly revealed as a palliative to modern existence. But in this way, Shaffer's *Equus* remains locked into that account of modern disenchantment that he wishes to critique. He represents the modern's identity at the front edge of history, caught in a trap between an enlightened future cured of all superstition and the loss of a past resonating with meaning and significance. In doing so, Shaffer essentially recapitulates the long history of nostalgic primitivism as a panacea for modern existence. Primitivism as a construction of modern meaning-making remains an intractable feature of modern chauvinism that regards "traditional" religions as the antidote to modern malaise. Shaffer is all too aware of this modern penchant for the primitive; indeed, he makes it a feature central to Dysart's quest for meaning. Dysart believes there's dangerous vitality in the ancient ways of being, but for all his championing of the primitive, he can't bring his modern self to commit: it is too vitiated, too listless.

I use that word endlessly: "primitive." "Oh, the primitive world," I say. "What instinctual truths were lost with it!" And while I sit there, baiting a poor imaginative woman [his wife] with the word, that freaky boy [Alan] tries to conjure the reality! I sit looking at the pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos—and outside my window he is trying to *become one*, in a Hampshire field.⁶⁹

This clear-eyed takedown of modern hypocrisy notwithstanding, Shaffer never dislodges Dysart's privileged position; he only shows that Dysart is not up to the sacrifice (literal and metaphorical) that the primitive requires. That is something, certainly, but it nevertheless remains solidly within the ambit of the modern fetishizing of the primitive.

As a point of comparison, Albee essentially takes young Alan Strang's experience with animals—transgressive, raw, hieratic—and reimagines it in the middle of modern secular existence itself, the Upper East Side of Manhattan. He transplants the heart of Alan Strang—his desperate quest for enchantment, embeddedness, and porousness—into the chest of Martin Grey, in every other way Dysart's doppelgänger. But Albee avoids the pitfall of primitivism by staging an immanent epiphany that moves Martin literally beyond the grasp of historical religion. As we've seen, he does this not by ignoring historical religions (i.e., Christianity and Greek paganism) but by deploying them as a fulcrum to launch characters into an immanent, but nevertheless inarticulate, ecstasy.

69 Ibid.

In *The Goat*, Jerry's disembedded search for "understanding" with the dog in *The Zoo Story* is finally secured. As we've seen, Albee coats Martin's epiphany scene with a thick religious sensibility, but what I have yet to mention is the way Stevie exclaims in terms both sacrilegious—"Christ!" "My God!"—and suggestive. As we saw, this is an old trick of Albee's, used first in Peter's exclamation after inadvertently stabbing "Peter: (*Whispering*) Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God ... (*He repeats these words many times, very rapidly.*)"⁷⁰ Peter continues this utterance, almost as a mantra, through to the very end, whereupon Jerry, at his death, returns the favor:

PETER: (*Off stage*)

(*A pitiful howl*)

OH MY GOD!

JERRY: (*His eyes still closed, he shakes his head and speaks; a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication*)

Oh ... my ... God.

(*He is dead.*)⁷¹

This stage description of "scorn and supplication" is telling. We see something similar in Ross' series of disgusted retorts upon seeing Martin and his son Billy engaged in a sexual kiss. "Jesus! Sick!" The religious-inflected swearing continues as Ross learns of Martin's arousal when Billy was just a baby sitting on his lap. "Jesus!," "Oh my God . . ." "Jesus. You're sick."⁷² Albee has Martin turn Ross' religious censoriousness against him (whom he dubs "Fucking Judas"):

MARTIN: (*Contempt*) Do you have any other words? Sick and Jesus? Is that all you have? [...] Is there anything "we people" don't get off on? Is there anything anyone doesn't get off on, whether we admit it or not—whether we *know* it or not? Remember Saint Sebastian with all the arrows shot into him? He probably came! God knows the faithful did! Shall I go on!? You want to hear about the cross?!⁷³

This alarming third-act cascade of sexual transgressions—bestiality, homosexual incest, pederastic incest—leaves Ross nearly breathless with sanctimonious disgust. But far from demurring, Martin does Ross one better by pivoting

⁷⁰ Albee, *Zoo Story*, 27.

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

⁷² Albee, *The Goat*, 51.

⁷³ Ibid., 52

to *include* religious martyrdom (“Jesus! Sick!”) within his list of sexual turn-ons. Nothing is sacred. Or everything is sexual. Or anything is sexual and thus sacred. As we saw above, the convergence of religious and sexual experience—at least at the allegorical level—is nothing new in mystic Christianity (to say nothing of ancient Greek worship). But here the exclusively immanent frame of modern experience collapses sexual ecstasy *with* religious epiphany, and vice versa. As moderns, we might not “admit it,” indeed, we might not even “*know* it,” but sexual desire is indifferent to the tidy borders modern conventions establish. The audience may or may not be willing to follow the ever-widening gyre of transgressive revelations. But my point here is that in Albee’s hands religious traditions are not staged as primitive resources from which a modern gains vitality through nostalgic return, or, like Dysart, bemoans its inaccessibility to the disenchanted. These are two sides of the same coin: modern primitivism requires religious traditions to be either perpetual resource or perpetual foil. Instead, Albee deploys traditional Christianity to stage his immanent epiphany by reconditioning its content for a modern immanent frame, refusing to treat it as ancient salve for modern disconsolations, but instead as a fulcrum for reimagining transcendence.

The result is two-fold. Albee stages the immanent frame—the disenchanted, disembedded, buffered self—as a genuinely shared feature of existence, at the same time that he shows its reality to be fundamentally isolating. This is what strikes one at the heart of Stevie’s final slaying of Sylvia: human community puts our private epiphanies to the test. Maybe even to the death.

MARTIN: (*Crying a little*) Why can’t anyone understand this ... that I am alone ... all ... alone!⁷⁴

The secular epiphany, however brief, really can hint at forms of existence that escape the immanent frame (reintroducing enchantment, embeddedness, porousness), but without a shared script for what constitutes viable epiphany, transgression comes with the territory. At least for the foreseeable future, as Albee’s epiphanies foretell, modern transcendence is shared precisely to the extent that it defies human community.

74 Ibid., 54.

Art Is a Hammer: Aura, Textual Awareness, and Comedy in Albee

David Marcia

Abstract

This article will analyze and explore two specific techniques Albee routinely employs throughout his work: textual awareness, which increases aesthetic distance reducing audience empathy, and comedy, which draws the audience into the performance without necessarily establishing empathy or overwhelming critical judgment. The interaction and juxtaposition of these two techniques accounts for the unusual and effective relationship that Albee's plays have with their audience. It also points to the necessity of understanding these relationships in performance and to what end they may ultimately be employed, as well as the overall innovative nature of Albee's dramaturgy. Textual awareness and comedy swing the hammer of paradox and parable, creating both connection and distance in the audience as well as a resonance that persists long after the performance has ended.

Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer; it does not reflect, it shapes.¹

LEON TROTSKY, *Literature and Revolution*

...

We don't understand music, it understands us.²

THEODORE ADORNO, *Aesthetic Theory*

∴

Edward Albee's art is indeed a hammer, creating its own difficult truth in performance rather than simply reifying the familiar that has grown stagnant and false. Albee also became the preeminent American playwright of his

¹ Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 120.

² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xii.

generation despite persistent and frequently abusive criticism regarding not just the quality and nature of his work but his very worthiness as a human being as well. This enmity must be acknowledged and accounted for in Albee scholarship since it periodically re-surfaces in various guises.³ However, once we allow for these prejudices, acknowledging that their influences may be both overt and subtle, blatantly stated and coded in euphemism, we are left with a frequent, if not ubiquitous critique of Albee's plays. Namely, their characters fail to inspire sufficient audience empathy. As figures they are too articulate, too privileged, too Waspy, too like one another, and always, too self-absorbed. If we concede this to be a potentially accurate observation, how are we to reconcile it as useful critique given Albee's undeniable success and influence as a playwright? Is there something about this persistent aspect of Albee's dramaturgy critical to its impact in performance and if so, what is its composition and the nature of its operation?

In his 1962 essay regarding *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Robert Brustein concisely states both his admiration of Albee's talent and his prescriptive critique of the playwright's "incongruous juxtapositions" and "sure-fire comic technique" that alienates the spectator "at the very moment he begins to accept it."⁴ These observations led Brustein to conclude, "His (Albee's) thematic content is incompatible with his theatrical content-hijinks and high seriousness fail to fuse."⁵ In so doing, Brustein identifies the innovative crux of Albee's dramatic technique as a negative, accusing the playwright of "coquetting with his own talent" and failing to have "a selfless commitment to a truthful vision of life which constitutes the universal basis of all serious art."⁶ It seems never to have occurred to Brustein, as it did to John Gassner in 1963, that perhaps Albee knew exactly what he was doing. Gassner wrote, "The play ... is alive in the struggle

3 Early in Albee's career, several well-placed critics, mistaking playwriting innovation as existential threat, feared gay playwrights were taking over the American theatre and using it as a vehicle to undermine and destroy traditional values. Both Howard Taubman and his successor at the *New York Times*, Stanley Kaufman, argued that due solely to their sexual orientation, gay playwrights were incapable of truthfully writing non-gay characters, rendering their creations a perverse and corrosive deception. Furthermore, Kaufman maintained that due to the oppression of straight society, gay writers could only be expected to strike out at their tormentors by depicting marriage in particular in the most vile, salacious, and untruthful ways they could think of. While this overt wave of homophobia largely crested by the early 1970s, it remains part of Albee's critical history and as such continually reappears, sometimes in its proper context, sometimes not.

4 Robert Brustein, "Albee and the Medusa's Head," *New Republic*, 3 November, 1962, 29–30. Interestingly, Brustein's later critiques of Albee's work fall under the heading of those discussed in the previous footnote.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

rather than in the explanation ... cause and effect are disproportionate" and describes characters "whose behavior breathes the fire of protest along with the stench of corruption."⁷ Gassner seems to agree with Michael Smith's review of the previous year that "Albee has thrown out the fundamentally sentimental means—basically, making the audience identify with the hero or heroine—by which the ordinary naturalistic play 'moves' its audience."⁸ Early negative criticism seems to be focused on displeasure and discomfort with exactly this issue: Albee's use of a naturalistic setting coupled with comedy and textual awareness that reduces audience empathy and engages critical faculties. The play's content for these negative reviewers was frequently described as pessimistic, untruthful, or, in the case of Diana Trilling, "aggressively nihilistic."⁹ Later, more positive investigations of *Virginia Woolf* unpack the play's textual awareness using semiotic and speech action theory as well as the ethos and structure of vaudeville.¹⁰ It is interesting that these same innovations were frequently seen as problematic by other prominent critics.

Albee's characters are fascinating but rarely likeable or even sympathetic in any consistent way; while unfailingly intelligent and articulate, they tend to lack any real ethical or moral compass. While brutally insightful into the failings of others, they stubbornly refuse to turn that insight inward or perversely refuse to change their behavior in response to it if they do. Taken individually or in aggregate, they are a maddening lot whose potential tends to be nullified, squandered, or at very best, precarious. This engenders audience investment of a strange sort, a perversely specific combination of empathy and apathy intentionally designed and deployed to engage the audience's emotion only to a specific point where their critical faculties become engaged. This dynamic puts Albee's characters in conflict with the actors who play them, and the audience, as well as with each other. In this article, I will analyze and explore two specific techniques Albee routinely employs throughout his work to produce this effect: textual awareness, which increases aesthetic distance reducing audience empathy, and comedy, which draws the audience into the performance

7 John Gassner, "Review of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," *Educational Theatre Journal* 15 (March 1963): 78–80.

8 Michael Smith, "Theatre Uptown," *Village Voice*, October 18, 1962. 11, 17. Smith's article remains one of the most cogent and insightful reviews of *Virginia Woolf*.

9 Diana Trilling, "The Riddle of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," in C.W.E. Bigsby, *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 80–88.

10 See Bigsby in *Edward Albee*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 141–160; Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4–9, 92–99, 185–186; Julian Wasserman, *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays* (Houston: The University of St. Thomas, 1983), 36–38; Ben-Zvi, in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 178–197.

without necessarily establishing empathy or overwhelming critical judgment. The interaction and juxtaposition of these two techniques accounts for the unusual and effective relationship that Albee's plays have with their audience. It also points to the necessity of understanding these relationships in performance and to what end they may ultimately be employed, as well as the overall innovative nature of Albee's dramaturgy. In Albee, textual awareness and comedy are not in service to character and plot; they are *how* character and action are created in performance and *why* Albee can create such powerful theatrical experiences with such minimal characterization and plot structure. Albee plays look realistic but they feel surreal, absurd, even carnivalesque, and they never stray far from the fact that they exist in performance, in a theatre. Textual awareness and comedy swing the hammer of paradox and parable, creating both connection and distance in the audience as well as a resonance that persists long after the performance has ended.

In blatant contradiction to the naturalism of their usual settings, Albee's text constantly calls attention to itself, commenting on the theatrical nature of the language, events, and relationships performed. Textual awareness drives an uncanny sort of wedge between the characters who exist on the page and the corporeal actors who play them, who, to varying degrees, seem to comment on their own situation as performers even as they create the world of the play. This locates the action within the play and the theatre rather than facilitating a willing suspension of disbelief,¹¹ reducing empathy, sensitizing actors and spectators to ideas and issues beyond the characters and their feelings. Like Brecht's concepts of *gestus* and *haltungen*, textual awareness places the actor within a specific position in society (*gestus*) as the character responds to the specific situation in the text (*haltungen*).¹² This paradox provides an opening for the creation of thematic content via parabolic experience rather than via simple linear story-telling, with a foregone beginning, middle, and unambiguous ending. Parable creates a unique psychic space wherein previous notions of reality and knowledge are confronted by unresolvable conundrums. This parabolic antinomy facilitates a melding of audience and performance as a work of art,

11 David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 111. Unlike Brecht, Albee's political/philosophical point of view is usually less blatant and didactic, arising from the characters and the dramatic situation rather than a specific ideological predisposition such as Brecht's interpretation of Marxism. The nature of Albee's innovations is that they employ and adapt European playwriting techniques in a uniquely postmodern American context that is simultaneously familiar and precarious.

12 *Ibid.*, 94, 97–98. Brecht coined the term “figure” as opposed to character because he preferred his actors to play the situation rather than anthropomorphizing the text or disappearing into some illusion they imagined their character to be.

creating the possibility of profound personal and societal change hitherto impossible. It becomes the very opposite of mere reification and reinforcement of the status quo, which Brecht referred to as culinary, “a means of pleasure long before it turned into merchandise,”¹³ theatre that is simply purchased, consumed, and excreted, without critique, resonance, or any lasting effect beyond the desire for further stimulation of a similar sort. Via metatheatre and parable, the fact that something is possible in or as a response to a work of art in performance provokes the insight that it is not impossible.

Concepts of aura, repetition, and aesthetic pressure are useful to an understanding of how textual awareness operates as an aspect of performance phenomenology. While aura is most commonly described as the distinctive quality generated by the work of art as it is observed by the spectator, Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno framed aura in more specific terms. Benjamin understood it as not only “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [apparition, semblance] of a distance, however near it may be,” but also as a form of perception that “invests” or endows a phenomenon with the “ability to look back at us,” to open its eyes or “lift its gaze.”¹⁴ Adorno’s understanding of “appearance” is closely related and expands on this latter aspect of aura: “Art-works become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term—that is, as the appearance of an other—when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being something momentary and sudden.”¹⁵ It is important to note that neither Benjamin nor Adorno consider aura/appearance to be in any way psychological, spiritual, or inherent in the object itself. Consistent with their commitment to Marxist materialism, both understand aura phenomenologically, as occurring only in the moment of lived experience; as such, it is unreal but not necessarily immaterial, since it possesses “the immanent character of being an act” and as such, is able to effect change.¹⁶ Especially in the case of Adorno, all art objects may be thought of as being capable of a primeval sort of performance, e.g., the real experience of their unreal potential, the appearance of an unreal other. Aura may be thought of as being especially significant in theatrical performance,

13 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 35.

14 Miriam Bratu Hanson, “Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (Winter, 2008): 339.

15 Adorno, 79.

16 Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Verso, 2014), 30–32.

since, like theatre itself, it is true, unreal, and capable of fomenting change in its audience.

Repetition is one way that aura may be manipulated by textual awareness. Throughout his work, Albee repeats various words, phrases, and motifs that generate an increasing textual awareness via the use of quotation, pseudo-quotation, baby-talk, allusion, pseudo-allusion, and contradiction. Just as it does in film and music, repetition of these tropes and the textual awareness they produce in performance pressures aura, making it increasingly unstable and uncontainable, bending the phenomenal experience into uncanny dimensions and opening previously impossible possibilities. Aura has the potential to bend space, and especially time, in ways that produce specific emotional responses in the spectator. Perhaps the most powerful of these possibilities is an experience of primal terror Adorno refers to as "shudder." "Because shudder is past and yet survives, artworks objectivate it as its afterimage ... The instant of appearance (or aura) in artworks is indeed the paradoxical unity or the balance between the vanishing and the preserved."¹⁷ Thus, aural instability, created by the pressure of repetition, brings into being both retrospection of the past and foreshadowing of the future in the present moment of perception. Aural instability also creates a continuum of possibilities within the moment-to-moment reality of the lived experience of live performance for both actor and spectator. According to Adorno, "In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist. It is not dreamt up out of disparate elements of the existing ... art promises what it is not ... because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible."¹⁸ Certain points in this continuum created by aural fluctuation may generate great scale and emotion, but they do not manipulate. They contain a multiplicity of equally valid and contradictory thematic content that cannot be resolved in any conventional way. They can only be synthesized via the audience's critical faculties during and after the performance is over. They edify and enlighten rather than deceive and satiate.

The audience is more entertained by an Albee character's interesting and outrageous behavior than they are empathically involved in it.¹⁹ This leads to the critically important factor of comedy in Albee's work. As Linda Ben-Zvi has shown by exploring and analyzing the influence of vaudeville in Albee's plays, comedy resists analysis; it is anarchic, transgressive, and draws the audience

¹⁷ Adorno, 80. Parenthetical expression added by the author.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁹ Another technique Albee routinely employs to hold the audience's attention without necessarily furthering empathy is literary exclusion. See Julian M. Wasserman, "The Idea of Language in the Plays of Edward Albee," in Bloom, 36–38.

into the action of the play out of a sense of being superior to the characters and their actions rather than via empathy or sympathy.²⁰ The premise of this article is that this lack of emotional investment in the characters is a specific technique Albee repeatedly employs throughout his work, which, coupled with comedy, creates audience involvement without resorting to the elaborate or excessive establishment of empathy or exposition.²¹

Kierkegaard viewed humor as the penultimate stage of existential awareness before faith.²² Indeed, without comedy, textual awareness as well as all of Albee's other talents and techniques fall flat in performance. Laughter in Albee's work functions as empathy, drawing the audience into the play and implicating them in its action. It is also frequently based in the very qualities of Albee's characters that critics find annoying, infuriating, repetitive, and self-referential across the cannon of his work. There is always a certain rigidity at the core of an Albee character that verges on the farcical, an obsessive preoccupation of some kind that cannot be fully satisfied and is continually frustrated. Typically, one spouse desires change of some kind; the other does not. This inability to adapt to evolving circumstances is key to the comedy in Albee's plays and indicative of its importance to their success or failure in performance. Laughter is superior to mere empathy in that the sense of superiority the spectator feels is by its very nature a kind of critique. The hapless character is non-threatening right up to the moment Albee's hammer drops, when we are overwhelmed by the depth of their suffering, the absurdity of an existence that creates so much desire and so little satisfaction. George and Martha, for example, are bedeviled as much by what they know and imagine to be possible as they are by their failure to attain anything but a poor facsimile of this potential.

Using Albee's innovative and unusual use of textual awareness and comedy as an analytic lens, this article will examine three representative plays from the canon to show how and to what effect these techniques are employed. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), we see how the use of humor and textual awareness as a substitute for audience empathy are initially developed. In *Marriage Play* (1987), we observe how these techniques are refined and essentialized, and in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2003), we see this essence employed to achieve one of Albee's most radical results in performance, an unprecedented evocation of tragedy via comedy.

20 Ben-Zvi, "Playing the cloud circuit": Albee's vaudeville show," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 178–197.

21 The use of literary exclusion and minimal/unreliable exposition also figure prominently. See Wasserman.

22 S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 259.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? begins with Martha's laughter followed by her homage to Betty Davis: "What a dump. Hey, what's that from? 'What a dump!'"²³ The movie Martha quotes, the name of which she and George never figure out, is *Beyond the Forest*, a lurid melodrama about the dire consequences of feminine infidelity, notable today only for its camp, for its cast, and for the fact that it is quoted at the beginning of a famous play. In doing so in the first moments of his first full-length play, Albee creates one of the signature effects that recur throughout his work, apparent theatrical naturalism combined with textual awareness. The scene is amusing (more on that later), but it is also a recognizably realistic situation with recognizably realistic characters, both of whom are drunk and one of whom will not relent until her spouse provides an answer she can't recall and perhaps never knew in the first place. It has the feel of something that is not quite a ritual (again, that will come later) but rather the recurring quirk of an established marriage wherein Martha convinces the disinterested George that it is only logical that he must know what she has forgotten. However, concurrent with this realism and revelation of character is an experience of textual awareness that is, for lack of a better word, quite literal. An actress playing the role of Martha is quoting/imitating the actress Betty Davis playing the role of Rosa Moline. The scene plays realistically while it also subtly calls attention to the invisible text and the theatricality of the production, a combination that Albee will continually refine and expand throughout his career. Another example of this is when the characters constantly comment on and critique each other's language and choice of words.

GEORGE: Martha's the devil with language, she really is.²⁴

NICK: (*Snapping it out.*) All right ... What do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say, no, it's funny. You can play that damn little game any way you want to, you know!²⁵

MARTHA: ABSTRUSE in the sense of recondite. (*Sticks her tongue out at George.*) Don't you tell me words.²⁶

23 Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004, 2005), 7. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

24 *Ibid.*, 14.

25 *Ibid.*, 18.

26 *Ibid.*, 31.

The first two exchanges are initiated by George insulting first Honey's forced laughter and then Nick's non-committal obsequiousness. As Nick points out, George takes issue more with the way things are said rather than with whatever content they contain. He is a composer/conductor searching for just the right rhythm and intonation, and he is far more interested in what language and behavior suggest than what they mean because the suggested is unguarded and truthful. In the first act, it is as if he is playing a sort of aesthetic game no one else, even Martha, is fully aware of. However, as the act progresses, George begins to lay bare the secrets and pressure points of everyone, himself included. Martha's correction of George incorrectly correcting her word choice is more direct and even more telling. Martha appears confused at first, mis-remembering that Nick is in the math department rather than biology; humiliatingly, Honey confirms George's correction of this fact. Then, in the next moment, when George presumes Martha means to say "abstract" rather than "abstruse," like a dangerously drunk pistolero who's still the fastest gun in the room, Martha draws and fires, "ABSTRUSE in the sense of recondite."²⁷ The line carries a lot of character: Martha is smart, educated, aware, insightful, and never to be underestimated. No matter how compromised she appears, Martha's default mode for any threat is attack and destroy. However, the "ABSTRUSE" line also calls attention to the semiotics of the stage, where, even though they are invisible in performance, words are chosen by playwrights very carefully, and actors drill endlessly to get them exactly right. Furthermore, since "abstruse" and "recondite" are far less familiar words to most audience members than "abstract," Martha's rebuke of George causes the play to "look back" at the audience "as the appearance of an other," correcting them as well as George. This bit of metatheatrical "accents the unreality of their own reality"²⁸ activating the audience's critical functions, creating aesthetic distance. Is Martha's definition correct, or is she mistaken or even lying? Is the playwright to be trusted? Is anyone? Do we know what is true, or do we simply accept whatever is performed in front of us as truth?

The most extreme use of textual awareness in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is how Albee employs the repetition of a childish ditty composed solely of the title five times throughout the play. In the first instance, Martha introduces the song and explains its significance, referring to the drunken faculty party they have just come from. Then she uses the song and its referent situation to goad George into continuing the party with Nick and Honey.²⁹ A few moments later,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bratu Hansen, 339.

²⁹ Albee, *Who's Afraid*, 11.

Martha again launches into the song, using its brute force to seize control of the conversation with their young guests, which George is trying to sabotage. He comments, "Lord, Martha, do we have to go through this again?"³⁰ At the end of Act One, George takes control of the song, using it to enroll Nick and Honey in verbally overpowering Martha's screed about his lack of accomplishment.³¹ Then George reprises the song by himself late in Act Two when he returns with ice, interrupting Nick and Martha's clinch.³² Finally, famously, and devastatingly, George ends the play with the "who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" ditty, and for the first and only time, the question is answered, by Martha, "I ... am ... George ... I ... am.... (*George nods, slowly. Silence; tableau. Curtain.*)"³³

Each iteration of the song serves a different purpose; it may be funny, annoying, cryptic, or strategic, but it always calls attention to the title of the play and in so doing, the theatrical circumstances of the performance. The repetition becomes familiar, but it also applies pressure to the aura of the moment in performance, rendering it increasingly unstable and uncanny until the fifth and final iteration, when, incredibly, it seems to come out of nowhere as an experience of shudder. The past that yet survives, "the balance between the vanishing and the preserved," illuminates the source of the catastrophe in Martha and George's marriage.³⁴ Primal terror, the fear of being afraid. When Martha does finally answer the question, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?," she ends the performance, not the play. The play continues to look back at the audience long after the lights go down, an audience made up largely of couples, many of a certain age, some younger, some older, and increasingly diverse, but with one thing in common, the question of marriage, whether it be in the past, present, or future. Comedy and textual awareness pull us into *Virginia Woolf* and critically juxtapose it against our own relationships and experience in ways both subtle and brutally effective. Will anything change? Will we sleep it off, sober up, and begin a toxic cycle again? Or can it be different? Can we be different? In any case, how can we believe ourselves to be superior to these characters and yet also feel so much in common with them? This is the parabolic space created by the play in performance; it is precipitated by the text, not in the text.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is also an example of how Albee began using comedy as an alternative to empathy in his work. George and Martha are two of Albee's more sympathetic characters; while educated, they are not upper

30 Ibid., 15.

31 Ibid., 41.

32 Ibid., 72.

33 Ibid., 98.

34 See endnote 17, above.

class and do not have the sort of economic or social mobility that would allow them to be wholly indifferent to the social obligations and morays connected to the college where George teaches and where Martha's father is president. They both have jobs or responsibilities and must defer to authority in order keep and maintain what they have. This makes them more sympathetic and relatable than, say, the characters in *A Delicate Balance* or *All Over*. More importantly, George and Martha are reliably and consistently funny to the point that it frequently overshadows and eventually embodies the pain and terror of their interior lives. Like so many comedians, Albee creates laughter from a very dark place, and the darkness can only be held at bay in front of an audience, and sooner or later, the audience always goes home. Within the world of the play, that audience is Honey and Nick, but metatheatrically, we are all involved. George and Martha are characters who make us laugh, and so, despite their cruelty and rage, we are drawn to them, not because they are attractive, but because they are funny. We appreciate the nature of their situation, and, to an extent, we care about what happens to them, not because they are virtuous, but because they are amusing and interesting. This is another example of Albee taking the realistic situation of a long, alcohol-soaked evening and theatricalizing it with laughter as opposed to simply building an uncritical empathy for the characters. While we are entertained by George and Martha's plight, do we really approve of their behavior? Would we choose it for ourselves? Would anyone want to trade places with Nick and Honey? This sense of superiority along with the disorienting and unsettling effects of George and Martha's vaudeville aesthetic eventually becomes strange, disturbing, and if not quite tragic, then certainly profoundly sad: "George and Martha: sad, sad, sad."³⁵ Sadness is an emotion we generally travel great distances to avoid, ignore, or deny, and yet few feelings seem so pervasive, so indicative of an examined life. George and Martha yearn for some tragic apocalypse, some cataclysmic judgment from the gods to validate their pain, only to find bad luck, poor choices, and the inescapable fact that the world as such doesn't give a damn how funny you are. It's a start, maybe.

Twenty-five years after *Virginia Wolf*, Albee created what is perhaps his most condensed and essentialized relationship in *Marriage Play*. Reduced to only two characters and a few scenes, in *Marriage Play* Albee takes repetition and textual awareness to an extreme further heightened by minimalist production values. This minimalism facilitates the vaudevillesque both in the patter of the dialogue as well as in the violent changes in the direction of the action. Almost every line in *Marriage Play* is either repeated or commented upon, imparting a

35 Ibid., 79.

fluctuation of aura that is at first comedic but finally deeply disconcerting, terrifying, and sad. This instability is heightened by characterizations so minimal and exposition so unreliable that while textual awareness creates aesthetic distance between character and actor, it is almost impossible to discern where one begins and the other leaves off, further increasing aural pressure and eventually a sense of uneasiness in the audience. Both the actor's specific position in society and the character's response to the dramatic situation are rendered strange and precarious, and laughter is created by the extremity of the on-stage behavior, the sudden shifts in tone, and the audience's sense of superiority in reference to the characters and their actions.

The setting is a comfortable suburban home. Jack is in his middle 50s, Gillian is in her early 50s, and, strangely specifically, the time is 3:30 on a weekday afternoon in late spring.³⁶ Apart from this, the only things we know are what the two characters say about themselves and about each other, things that one or the other frequently dispute. There is no way to judge the truth or accuracy of anything said. Both Jack and Gillian are obsessed with their own and especially with each other's choice of words. Both characters constantly challenge and correct the other. Gillian is especially sensitive to Jack's grammatical lapses and tortured syntax as he flailingly attempts to justify exactly why he is leaving their thirty-year marriage. Jack is suspicious of Gillian's recollections of their life together, but either because of advancing senility or a chronic lack of attention, or both, he can't verbalize exactly why. Both characters are in the habit of repeating what the other has just said. Jack goes so far as to exit and re-enter four times at the play's beginning, either because he is unhappy with his own performance or because he is unhappy with Gillian's response.

Gillian sits in a chair, reading, laughing occasionally. After a bit Jack enters through the door.

GILLIAN: (*Looks up from her book, fairly friendly.*) Hello.

JACK: (Pause.) Hello.

GILLIAN: You're home early. (*Gillian reads, giggles. Jack puts his briefcase down, looks at her, looks back to his briefcase.*)

JACK: Yes. I'm leaving you.

GILLIAN: (*Thinks about it, frowns.*) What do you mean?

36 This specificity is unusual in Albee and suggests a Beckett-like circularity of time and action that becomes more and more apparent as the play progresses. It is also realistic, suggesting that whenever Jack decides to leave Gillian, he also leaves work early to come home and do so. The specific time denotes a pattern, even a ritual of behavior that neither spouse can escape.

JACK: I'm leaving you. (*Are you an idiot?*) I'm leaving you!

GILLIAN: (*Back to her book, dismissive.*) Of course.³⁷

Gillian's book is titled *The Book of Days*—not the poem by Ovid—rather it is her autobiographic “clinical record ... Of our making love.”³⁸ Gillian's tome contains nearly three thousand entries; Jack demands that she read three selections from it, then comments on how her style merely mimics Hemingway, Henry James, and D. H. Lawrence, respectively. The presence of Gillian's book, which is large and on stage throughout the play, gives textual awareness a physical presence on stage. The constant repetition of text and action early in the play give it an uncanny sense of two people whose life together has become an eternal rehearsal for divorce. However, no matter how much they practice and prepare, neither Jack nor Gillian ever comes to the point where they are ready to truly perform the action.

Brecht frequently had his actors comment on the text in the third person. It was a rehearsal exercise designed to give the actors a sense of separation between themselves and the characters they played. Brecht's goal was for the actor to then play the differences between themselves and the character, activating the audience's critical faculties, rather than the similarities, which led to increased audience empathy.³⁹ Albee does this exercise one better by incorporating it into the play text. Not once but twice, a character comments on what the other has said in the third person.

GILLIAN: (*Too brightly.*) It was an interesting day, then?

JACK: She chirped.

GILLIAN: She chirped.⁴⁰

And later:

JACK: (*Gets up.*) I think I'll come in again (*Picks up briefcase.*)

GILLIAN: What! Go out and come back in!

JACK: (*Ugly mimicry*) What!? Go out and come back in?

GILLIAN: He mimicked.

JACK: He mimicked. Yes; go out and come back in. (*Moves toward the door.*) I'll try once again.

GILLIAN: (*Mimicking.*) Hello; I'm leaving you.⁴¹

37 Albee, *Marriage Play* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1987, 1995), 5. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

38 *Ibid.*, 12.

39 Barnett, 120–123.

40 *Ibid.*, 6.

41 *Ibid.*, 9.

On the surface, this is yet another example of Albee's adult characters speaking and acting like petulant children. However, it is also metatheatre, blatantly calling attention to the fact that every word Jack and Gillian say is in fact scripted by Albee and repeated verbatim at every performance. Unlike the intention of Brecht's exercise, Albee's innovation is that the third person comments, while inconsistent with realism, are strangely appropriate to the characters and their situation, which is itself almost as theatrical as their actual circumstances in performance. This simultaneously creates aesthetic distance while also reducing the distance/distinction between actor and character. The effect is at first comedic but grows increasingly disconcerting as it becomes apparent that neither Jack nor Gillian really seems to know either each other or themselves. Their marriage is both play and a play and ultimately a kind of progressive false consciousness that exists only to continually justify its existence and resist change of any sort.

The comedy in *Marriage Play* is rooted in incongruity, rigidity of character, and abrupt changes in the direction of the action. Gillian and Jack are almost a parody of Albee spouses. On one hand, they appear to be a stolid and unremarkable middle-aged couple married thirty years, while on the other they are, in their separate ways, petty, vindictive, sex-obsessed adolescents. While their material lives have advanced with age, their interior lives (what Hegel would call the progress of the spirit) have either regressed or never developed in the first place.⁴² The incongruity of the characters' inner lives with outward appearances and the outrageous contradictions and violations of expectations are why they are humorous and entertaining to spectators as opposed to sympathetic. Jack and Gillian have had, it would seem, every opportunity to grow up and out of their issues with each other and yet have refused to do so. This refusal generates the obsession and rigidity each character exhibits throughout the play, imparting a farcical quality to the performance. They cannot compromise because they can't appreciate or even acknowledge the other person's point of view as being remotely plausible.

GILLIAN: You're too smart to kid yourself, you know.

JACK: (*Rage.*) I know I'm smart!

GILLIAN: (*Offhand.*) You're so *dumb*.

JACK: (*Softer*) You're impossible.⁴³

42 Charles Taylor, "Hegel and the Philosophy of Action," in *Hegel on Action*, ed. Arto Laitinen and Constantine Sandis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 31.

43 Albee, *Marriage Play*, 39.

A little more than half way through the play, there is an abrupt and violent change in the direction of the action worthy of vaudeville. While earlier in the play,⁴⁴ Jack threatens to strike Gillian, and Gillian has hit her husband with a thrown magazine, now, suddenly and unexpectantly, a full blown, realistic, physical brawl breaks out and goes on for some time. Albee's stage directions indicate that both characters should end up on the floor bloodied and winded and that the altercation should not be "too brief."⁴⁵ This explosion of violent physical action in a play with such extensive textual awareness is shocking and funny because it is so incongruous. (Imagine the couple in *Private Lives* punching it out.) Also, while it seems clear that both spouses, at least fleetingly, want to hurt the other physically, neither is especially good at it; this is simply not the sort of combat they were bred for. The fight, while comedic, marks a transition into more serious issues. Afterward, neither Gillian nor Jack seems to have the energy to reflexively duck and deflect the other's words and emotions.

JACK: Please? (*A hand up.*) Please? Alright? (*Gillian nods or shrugs.*) Nothing is enough ... for a life. I mean. No matter the challenges, the variety of challenge-contradiction even—no matter *what* ... variety or constancy, we come to the moment we understand, if we are *honest* ...

GILLIAN: ... with ourselves ... or is this not that part?⁴⁶

No matter who or what, nothing is enough, given all that is possible in the tiny slice of time we are given. As Norma Jenckes notes, the play ends as it began, with Jack saying he is leaving and doing nothing, alluding to the end/beginning of a Beckett-like cycle with no resolution possible.⁴⁷ The continued repetition of Jack's grave pronouncement followed by his complete lack of taking any discernable action towards its accomplishment calls attention to the text one final time and is sadly humorous. Gillian and Jack may well break up someday, but it will never be this day. The aural disruption seems to travel in a loop between the past and an eternal present rather than in a line from beginning to end. However, when Albee directed the play himself, his blocking of this final moment was telling and perhaps illuminating. At the end of the play, Gillian and Jack sit looking out toward the audience, holding hands as the lights fade

44 Ibid., 8, 15.

45 Ibid., 25.

46 Ibid., 38.

47 Jenckes, "Postmodern Tensions in Albee's Recent Plays," in Mann, *Edward Albee: A Case-book*, 113–116.

to black, a contrasting grace note to the combat what came before and a final disruption if not defeat of the play's aural/temporal spiral.⁴⁸

The quest to fill the existential gap between ambition and accomplishment is continued and drastically extended beyond mere human interactions in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a definition of tragedy*). In this play, textual awareness creates a very specifically Albeesque homage to Noël Coward. Stevie and Martin are not simply an urbane, witty, upper-class couple; they are aware of the obligation they have to each other and to the world to maintain a certain style, grace, and decorum in their lives. Their status in the world delineates not only their marital and familial relationships but their public obligations as well.

(The next several speeches are done in a greatly exaggerated Noel Coward manner: English accents, flamboyant gestures.)

STEVIE: Something's going on, isn't it?

MARTIN: Yes! I've fallen in love!

STEVIE: I knew it!

MARTIN: Hopelessly!

STEVIE: I knew it!

MARTIN: I've fought against it!

STEVIE: Oh, you poor darling!

MARTIN: Fought hard!

STEVIE: I suppose you'd better tell me!

MARTIN: I can't! I can't!

STEVIE: Tell me! Tell me!

MARTIN: Her name is Sylvia!

STEVIE: Sylvia! Who is Sylvia?

MARTIN: She's a goat; Sylvia is a goat! (*Acting manner dropped; normal tone now; serious, flat.*) She's a goat.

STEVIE: (*Long pause; she stares, finally smiles. She giggles. Chortles, moves towards the hall; normal tone*) You're too much! (*Exits.*)⁴⁹

In a manner similar to the beginning of *Virginia Woolf*, we have two actors playing two characters playing two actors playing a parody of two generic Coward characters. Furthermore, it appears they perform this banter for themselves

48 Rakesh H. Solomon, *Albee in Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 146.

49 Albee, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a definition of tragedy*) (New York: Overlook Press, 2000), 16–17. All quotations of the play are from this edition.

all the time as a demonstration of their sense of humor and of the strength of their relationship as well as a comment on the privileged and vaguely silly life they lead as “People Who Matter.” Throughout the play, Albee continually draws attention to the performance’s text and to its status as theatre, especially alluding to Greek tragedy, even though it does so for comic effect:

ROSS: I hear a kind of ... rushing sound, like a ... woooooosh!, or, wings, or something.

MARTIN: It’s probably the Eumenides.

ROSS: More like the dishwasher. There; it stopped.

MARTIN: Then it probably wasn’t the Eumenides: they don’t stop.⁵⁰

Or when Albee alludes to Arthur Kopit’s first play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Momma’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feeling So Sad*.

STEVIE: “... doubtless Martin will tell you all, I have not, all I cannot.”
(*To Martin*) What are friends for, eh?

BILLY: (*Really sad*) Oh Dad!

MARTIN: Poor Dad?

BILLY: What?

MARTIN: Nothing.⁵¹

Or later in the play when Stevie references Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

STEVIE: ... Why do you call her Sylvia, by the way? Did she have a tag or something? Or, was it more: Who is Sylvia, /Fair is she/That all our goats commend her ...⁵²

Shakespeare’s song continues:

Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness.
Love doth to her eyes repair,
To help him of his blindness;
And being help’d inhabits there.
Then to Sylvia let us sing,

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 51.

⁵² Ibid., 63.

That Sylvia is excelling;
 She excels each mortal thing
 Upon the dull earth dwelling.
 To her let us garlands bring.⁵³

This is a silly song, a comedic interlude based in adolescent infatuation, and yet it will become apparent that it is precisely how Martin thinks and feels about Sylvia. She is not an object of lust; she is a goddess to be loved without end and worshiped without question. Furthermore, Martin's relationship with Sylvia is non-verbal, at least in the sense of the extended two-way conversations we have witnessed with Stevie. There is no bantering with Sylvia. This radical juxtaposition between a relationship that is extensively verbal versus one that is perforce mostly silent is one of many things that pressures aura in the direction of comedy. It is incongruent, absurd, and consistently funny, but the aural pressure builds with each laugh like a winding spring until it snaps and disintegrates into tragedy. Most of the *The Goat* could pass for a postmodern comedy of manners; however, as its duration extends in performance, it becomes its own opposite. The effect in performance is measured and cumulative, the quality of aura that creates the play's "ability to look back at us"⁵⁴ becomes increasingly unstable; the textual awareness that was comedic explodes into tragedy as the reality of the unreal is revealed in the theatre. The Furies *are* real, and there are, it turns out, realistic consequences to Martin's transgressions. Aural pressure bursts into shudder, the primal fear of retribution, both human and godly. When Stevie enters with the bloody corpse of Sylvia, it is as if she rides through the shattered living room on an eccyclema. Suddenly, everything that has come before loses its ironic detachment in a moment of catharsis over the death of an innocent who has paid the price for Martin's sins; Sylvia, initially a punchline, is transformed into a goat song of tragedy.

There are many reoccurring techniques that emerge during Albee's and a great many other playwright's careers. The point of this article is that Albee's use of repetition and textual awareness to pressure aura, creating uncanny parabolic effects and comedy as opposed to mere empathy, is unique, innovative, and influential. Furthermore, this technique evolved during his career, becoming increasingly specific and powerful to the point where it manifests the capability to evoke tragic catharsis and parabolic epiphany via essentially comedic means. Part of this technique is that Albee's plays are placed in realistic settings, but this does not necessarily make them realistic plays; it simply

53 William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV.ii.44–53, The Norton Shakespeare (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 117–118.

54 Bratu Hanson, 339.

works in juxtaposition to the continual textual awareness and heightens aural fluctuation, making the familiar strange and precarious. Albee's use of realism can also obscure and confuse critical thought, if for no other reason than the critic's expectation of textual naturalism fails to be met and so the play and playwright are found to be found wanting. The expectation of some degree of realism is necessary in that there must always be some sort of real referent inspiring anything mimetic; otherwise it would fail to be recognizable to its audience. However, it is also necessary to recognize the distinction between realism/naturalism as an overarching aesthetic versus its far more common application as a tool that is simply one part of a more complex work of art that may not aspire or intend to have a pat and linear beginning, middle, and end or operate solely via the generation of an escalating level of audience empathy.

Affecting the Lives of “Others”: The Journey of Albee’s Plays in the Soviet Union

Julia Listengarten

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between Edward Albee’s dramaturgy and Soviet theatre, specifically the ways Albee’s dramatic and theatrical innovations impacted the development of Soviet theatre practices during the Cold War period when government-sanctioned socialist realism continued to inform production choices and theatre aesthetics. Considering the journey of Albee’s plays in the USSR, particularly in relation to the country’s shifting politics, I suggest that Albee’s complex dramatic style which blends an absurdist sensibility with irony and social satire challenged the existing socialist realist framework of Soviet productions and paved the way for Soviet, and later Russian, theatre’s experimentation with European absurdist. This discussion expands Albee’s role as a theatrical and dramatic innovator beyond the United States, places him in dialogue with other cultures and theatrical traditions, and welcomes further examination of his innovative influence in a global context.

In this essay, I augment the scholarship on Edward Albee by examining his influence beyond the United States—placing him in dialogue with other cultures and theatrical traditions, specifically those of Soviet theatre during the Cold War. By considering the journey of Albee’s plays in the USSR, particularly in relation to the country’s shifting politics, I suggest that Albee’s complex dramatic style, which blends an absurdist sensibility with irony and social satire, and his theatrical innovations challenged the government-sanctioned socialist realist framework of Soviet productions. Furthermore, I suggest that Albee’s dramaturgy paved the way for experimentation with European absurdist in Soviet, and Russian, theatre in the Cold War and afterward. This essay positions Albee’s theatre in an intercultural context and welcomes further examination of his artistic influence from a global perspective.

Albee commented in 2001 about the global appeal of his work that had been produced “all over the world ... in Latin America, Europe, Asia.” He added, “And I believe some of my work was rather popular in the former Soviet Union, but one wouldn’t hear anything from over there about performances of one’s plays

at that time.”¹ There is a shortage of information in English about productions of Albee’s plays staged in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Barbara Lee Horn’s comprehensive *Edward Albee: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (2003) and Stephen J. Bottoms’s annotated volume *Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (2000), an expansive critical production history of this internationally recognized play, do not mention any of the Soviet or post-Soviet productions of his work. Philip C. Kolin’s *Conversations with Edward Albee* (1988) and Mel Gussow’s *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (2001) make only sparse references to Albee’s perceptions about Soviet theatre and culture.

Although Albee himself seemed to be fascinated with Soviet theatre—he traveled to the USSR on several occasions and befriended Soviet writers and theatre makers during his brief visits—Cold War politics contributed to the dearth of critical discussion of his plays in production on Soviet stages. As a theatre student in Moscow in the late 1980s, I was quite familiar with translations of Albee’s work. Hardly a household name in the Soviet Union, Albee was fairly well known in literary and theatrical circles, and a few of his plays had been translated into Russian and staged by alternative theatre companies. The theatre behind the Iron Curtain, however, was largely inaccessible to Western critics, and Albee’s presence in Soviet and post-Soviet theatrical culture remains largely unknown in the West. I aim to fill this gap of knowledge as well as to trace Albee’s influence on Soviet theatre and playwriting, and assess the legacy of his innovative dramatic style in the Soviet Union.²

1 Who’s Afraid of American Writers? Albee and Steinbeck in the Soviet Union

Albee’s visit to the Soviet Union in 1963 as part of the American-Soviet cultural exchange program, which President John F. Kennedy initiated at the height of the Cold War, marks the beginning of his complicated relationship with Soviet theatre and culture. Invited by John Steinbeck to join him and his wife, Elaine, on their trip to Soviet bloc countries, Albee spent a month in the Soviet Union before traveling to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. In the USSR, he went to Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, met with Soviet

1 Richard Salzberg, “A Conversation with Edward Albee,” *Port Folio Weekly Magazine*, September 25, 2001, <http://highbridgepublications.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Edward-Albee-Interview.pdf>.

2 Much of this analysis depends on the availability of sources—primarily journalistic reports and production reviews in the Russian language.

writers and students, visited theatres, attended official functions organized by the U.S. Embassy, drank heavily, and listened to the disheartening stories of dissidents. There are several scattered accounts of the trip from both sides of the Atlantic, each pointing to its significance in bridging a cultural divide between the countries, whose Cold War rhetoric deeply entrenched their mutual suspicion. A brief period of cultural liberalization and progressive political reforms during the Nikita Khrushchev era was ending, and the Soviets found themselves again on the brink of political repression, tougher censorship, and cultural isolationism. Despite the devastating news of Kennedy's assassination, the journey of the Steinbecks and Albee to the heart of the Eastern bloc was filled with extraordinary meetings, unexpected encounters, creative discoveries, and occasionally frustrating moments. Most important, I suggest, it left a memorable imprint on young writers and artists desperate for voices and artistic expression outside Soviet propaganda. By shifting the focus from Albee's own perception and understanding of Soviet culture to the crucial impact that the trip made on Soviet writers and artists, I offer a new perspective in examining Albee's influences, not only as an innovative playwright and bold theatre maker, but also as a cultural ambassador and staunch advocate for human rights.³

Well known and revered in the Soviet Union for his novels, particularly *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was celebrated for his critique of capitalistic inequality. He had traveled to the USSR twice, in 1936 and 1947, on both occasions encountering the horrifying realities of the Stalinist regime. Even though he felt ambivalent about returning to the country, he thought that even a slight relaxation of censorship and repressive politics in the Soviet Union and the reduction of American-Soviet political tension would spark cultural exchange. Steinbeck invited director Elia Kazan to join him on the trip, and when Kazan declined, the offer went to Albee. Thinking of Albee as a traveling companion, Steinbeck saw, as Gussow notes, that the presence of this young, controversial, and innovative playwright could be beneficial for bridging political and cultural differences between American and Russian writers.⁴ Representing a new generation of American intellectuals whose political views, particularly of

3 David A. Crespy touches on Albee's first trip to the Soviet Union in "Coming Back a Short Distance Correctly: Albee's Absurdist Adventures in Berlin, Moscow, and Vienna," published in the previous volume of the series (*Edward Albee and Absurdism* [Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2017]: 126–142). Although I share a couple of sources, I will rely mostly on an "insider" perspective—mine and the perspectives of those who took part in the cultural exchange program from the Soviet side—to consider how Soviet writers and artists responded to this trip as well as Albee's subsequent visits to the country.

4 Mel Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (New York: Applause, 2001), 205.

the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, differed considerably from Steinbeck's, Albee would express a new set of ideas in conversations with dissenting young voices or ease political discussions with old hard-line defenders of the Stalinist system, Steinbeck thought.⁵

Peter Bridges, an American diplomat in Moscow appointed to be the Steinbecks' escort,⁶ writes in his memoir of the complicated negotiations needed to organize meetings between the American guests and groups of Soviet writers. He describes unpleasant encounters involving Steinbeck, Albee, and the Soviet bureaucracy and recalls the constant presence of Frida Lurye—most likely a Soviet intelligence officer—who was assigned to the Steinbecks and Albee as an interpreter and guide. Bridges also reminds us of the power of “the Stalinist dictum that all art must be socialist in content [and] realist in style,”⁷ which continued to overshadow Soviet culture in the 1960s. The Union of Soviet Writers, an organization formed in 1932 by decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, strictly observed socialist dogma, mandating policies in literary arts, managing periodicals, controlling writers' benefits, and training young authors in socialist realism. Any writer who aspired to be published had to be a Union member. “It was this official Union,” Bridges writes, “that was to function as Steinbeck's and Albee's host in the USSR.”⁸ Because Soviet authorities closely monitored the itinerary of the American writers and surveillance throughout the trip was intense, these meetings had to be organized through Union leaders instructed to orchestrate each event so that the dialogue would be largely manipulated, reality considerably filtered, and genuine concerns avoided or silenced.

A key goal of the trip for both Steinbeck and Albee was to connect with younger Soviet writers in hopes of breaking through the brick walls of the official Soviet narrative: to share personal views about American and Soviet cultures, to listen to the concerns of emerging Soviet authors, and to observe the authentic experiences of the generation coming of age after Josef Stalin.

5 John M. Ditsky also discusses the building of a strong friendship between Albee and Steinbeck during this trip in “Steinbeck and Albee: Affection, Admiration, and Affinity” (*Steinbeck Quarterly* 26, no. 1–2 [1993]: 13–23.) Ditsky relies on Steinbeck's autobiographical account in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking Press, 1984).

6 Because of the opening of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, his adaptation of Carson McCullers' novella, at Broadway's Martin Beck Theatre that same fall, Albee flew to Moscow a few weeks after the Steinbecks arrived in the Soviet Union. US Embassy attaché William Luers was assigned to be Albee's escort during his visit in the USSR.

7 Peter Bridges, “A Note on Steinbeck's 1963 Visit to the Soviet Union,” *Steinbeck Review* 4, no. 1 (2007): 82.

8 Ibid.

The visit with a group of Moscow writers from the literary magazine *Yunost* (Youth)⁹ was particularly significant. *Yunost* published controversial work—when it could circumvent censorship—and won tremendous respect from young intellectual readers. Frequent contributors to *Yunost* included Bella Akhmadulina, Vasily Aksyonov, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Andrei Voznesensky—a post-Stalin generation of emerging authors who pushed for greater artistic freedom, embraced innovative literary styles, often criticized Soviet authorities, and became known in the West as the Russian “New Wave” literary movement. Steinbeck insisted on meeting these writers, whose artistic contributions revealed a striking contemporary sensibility, the kind of political audacity that was unprecedented in the political climate, and fearless independence from the imposed ideological narrative.

Despite the constant monitoring of the events arranged for Steinbeck and Albee, there is little documentation of these cultural exchanges, and the available information is primarily anecdotal. However, in her article “John Steinbeck and the Writers of the Soviet Sixties: The Meeting at the Editorial Office of the Magazine *Yunost* (1963),” Russian scholar L. I. Zhdanova offers a brief account of discussions before and during the meeting.¹⁰ Besides incorporating archival documents related to Steinbeck and Albee’s visit to the USSR, she relies mostly on recollections of the Soviet writers who participated in this occasion.

Before the meeting, the chief editor of the magazine, Boris Polevoy, met with each member of his editorial board, warning the writers to be extremely vigilant for politically provocative situations and ignore controversial questions. If they did not adhere to the party line, the Soviet state could shut down the magazine immediately. Writer and poet Anatoly Gladilin, who defected from the Soviet Union in 1976 and has since resided in Paris, recalls the authorities’ mandate to demonstrate the Soviet people’s sheer happiness and prosperity to the American guests. Poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, painting a vivid picture of the meeting’s often tragi-comic moments, comments on his colleagues’ and his own feeling of powerlessness and frustration—being unable to respond to Steinbeck’s direct questions about their artistic contributions or to offer their honest opinions on Soviet political developments. Yevtushenko remembers that Steinbeck spent about an hour vigorously criticizing the American government, society, and media; he then paused, wiped the sweat off his

9 See the description of this meeting in L.I. Zhdanova, “John Steinbeck and the Writers of the Soviet Sixties: The Meeting at the Editorial Office of the Magazine *Yunost* (1963),” *Vestnik MGOU*, no. 1 (2016): 212–218, <http://docplayer.ru/46993926-Dzh-steynbek-i-sovetskie-pisateli-shestidesyatniki-vstrecha-v-redakcii-zhurnala-yunost-1963.html>.

10 Ibid.

forehead, and winked at his listeners: "I have laid out everything that I do not like about my country. It is your turn now—what is it that you don't like about yours? Come on, wolf-cubs—bare your teeth!"¹¹ Sweating profusely, their faces turning red, the "wolf-cubs" looked uncomfortable and defeated, at a loss for words. Gladilin writes, "We knew we were creating an impression of being the idiots ... but we could not betray the journal, we gave [Polevoy] our word."¹²

The visit, Zhdanova remarks, made such a profound impact on its participants that a year later, Polevoy was compelled to write a letter to Steinbeck on behalf of the editorial office, apologizing for the lack of candor and inviting the American to return to the Soviet Union—this time, he hoped, without official overseers. But there were no more visits. Through PEN, the international association of writers, Steinbeck and Albee invited the young writers to the United States as a next step in the cultural exchange, only for Soviet authorities to ignore the request. Even though the "wolf-cubs" could not directly address Steinbeck's questions in 1963, they continued to engage with him, overtly and implicitly, through their literary work, enthusiastically responding to Steinbeck's provocation to "bare their teeth."¹³ Later in her memoirs, Akhmadulina observed that this meeting became a pivotal event in the lives of the entire generation of Soviet writers.¹⁴ In a politically unique and emotionally compelling moment, the writers shared space with a famous American novelist, listened to his passionate critique of American society, and grasped the precariousness of their own situation and their lack of rights as artists and citizens. This meeting also might have prompted them to recognize their social and artistic responsibility to stand up to the government's hypocrisy, to fight complicity and political corruption, and to challenge the oppressive ideology.

Albee's name is absent from these recollections, but whether or not he participated in this meeting, he shared his impressions of similar encounters—visits with young Ukrainian writers, drinking parties with avant-garde artists, and heated debates with Leningrad University students in a packed dormitory room. In a news conference with American reporters as he was leaving Moscow in December 1963, Albee stressed that the Soviet writers "were not depressed and not optimistic, but ironic"¹⁵ about their political peril and complete artistic isolation from the rest of the world. The following year, in an interview about his Soviet experiences, he said that the younger playwrights he met on

11 Ibid. All translations in this essay are mine.

12 Ibid., 115.

13 Steinbeck died in 1968 of congestive heart failure.

14 Boris Messerer, "Promelk Belly" [A glimpse of Bella], *Oktyabr* 8 (2013): 129.

15 Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*, 209.

his trip were "courteous and knowledgeable, but seemed a bit careful ... and kept away from politics."¹⁶

The oppressive environment of the Soviet writers and artists whom Albee encountered informed his understanding of the role he could play in the international literary and artistic community.¹⁷ He supported Soviet intellectuals for decades. In 1979, Albee joined prominent American authors Arthur Miller, William Styron, John Updike, and Kurt Vonnegut in defending an underground publication, "samizdat," of the alternative literary almanac *Metropol*, which challenged the bureaucracy and came under vicious attack from the authorities for its "dirty" anti-Soviet content and rotten "pornographic" spirit. The letter, published in *The New York Times* and addressed to the Union of Soviet Writers, demanded an end to the persecution of the almanac's editors and authors, among them the "wolf-cubs" of 16 years before.¹⁸

2 An Absurdist or a Social Realist?

Albee was barely known in the Soviet Union when he visited in 1963. His name first appeared in a Soviet newspaper in 1960 in an article that introduced him as "a young representative of the Beckett school."¹⁹ In 1962, *Teatr*, a theatre journal, wrote about a production of Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith*, cheering its denunciation of American racism and referring to Albee as "an active participant of the Off-Broadway movement."²⁰ Albee's name appeared again the next year, in an article that examined *The Zoo Story* and positioned the playwright among writers whose "critical vision is imbued with the feeling of disgust, horror, and cynicism."²¹

Whereas some scholars focused on absurdist elements in Albee's work, others underlined the social critique in his plays—a dual perspective that colored the Soviet perception of Albee's work for decades. In 1963, the year of Albee's

16 Philip C. Kolin, ed., *Conversations with Edward Albee* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1988), 40.

17 Yale Richmond, in his book *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), discusses Albee's continued interactions with Soviet writers.

18 Ekaterina Astafieva, "Travlya Metropolya" [The smear campaign of Metropol], *Diletant*, September 12, 2016, http://diletant.media/articles/30815144/?sphrase_id=4869505.

19 V. M. Paverman, *Dramaturgiya Edvarda Albee 60-x godov XX veka* [Edward Albee's dramaturgy of the 1960s of the 20th century] (Yekaterinburg: Izdatelstvo Uralskogo Universiteta, 2004), 4.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

visit to the USSR, A.A. Anikst and G.N. Boyadzhiev, renowned Soviet scholars of Western theatre, wrote extensively about Albee's dramaturgy in their book *6 stories about American theatre*. In sharing their impressions from seeing the productions of *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* in the United States, they commented on the profound feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and dread in these plays, but particularly pointed to Albee's exposure of a false American Dream.²² Soviet critics and theatre historians, for the most part, were interested not in the metaphysical angst of Albee's characters, but in the opportunity to emphasize the underlying connections between his pessimism and the socio-economic ills of American capitalism. Theatre historian N.A. Anastasiev was perhaps the first one to argue that Albee's pessimistic philosophy is rooted in a tragic worldview shaped by America's failed social structure.²³

Perhaps not coincidentally, the first work of Albee's to be published in the Soviet Union was *The Death of Bessie Smith*, which appeared in *Foreign Literature* magazine in 1964 in a Russian translation by Nina Treneva. A condemnation of American racism, the play set in 1937 in Memphis, Tennessee, tells a devastating (if apocryphal) version of the famous Black American blues singer's death: Smith was refused admittance to a White hospital after a serious car accident and died hours later.²⁴ Even though the work was largely unfamiliar to Soviet readers in the 1960s, a play by a Western dramatist who exposed racial intolerance in America was welcomed in the USSR, predominantly because Albee's position seemed to be in perfect tune with the Soviet critique of Western ideology. The next major publication of Albee's work appeared in 1976, the collection entitled *The Death of Bessie Smith and other plays*, which included translations of *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *All Over*, offering a more comprehensive picture of the playwright's contribution to the American theatrical canon.

3 Albee's Characters—Faraway and Nearby²⁵

As Soviet scholars debated over Albee's work—whether to place it among social-problem plays or absurdist drama—Soviet theatres offered diverse,

22 A.A. Anikst and G.N. Boyadzhiev, 6 рассказов об американском театре [6 stories about American theatre] (Moskva, 1963), 20–23. Also in Paverman, *Dramaturgiya Edvarda Albee*, 4.

23 Paverman, *Dramaturgiya Edvarda Albee*, 5–6.

24 Reports of Smith's death dispute the part about the White hospital.

25 This subheading refers to the title of a newspaper article by prominent Soviet critic Mikhail Shvydkoi (*Pravda*, July 22, 1985) about the staging of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Sovremennik Theatre.

often daring, visions of his plays, pushing against imposed cultural norms, perplexing audiences with innovative theatrical techniques, and causing anxiety for Soviet censors. Albee's production history in the Soviet Union is rooted in Moscow's Sovremennik²⁶ Theatre, an experimental ensemble company that a group of young actors, all graduates of the School-Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, founded in 1956 during the initial phase of de-Stalinization. Stalin's death marked a time for philosophic reckoning and political and social change. Censorship was relaxed, millions of political prisoners were released from labor camps, the reputations of many who died in Stalinist purges were rehabilitated, and masses of landless peasants were moved to cities. The young theatre artists who formed Sovremennik sought to be on the front lines of this cultural transition. Like the young writers of *Yunost*, they yearned to capture the spirit of change, address society's vital contemporary topics, and debunk ideological and aesthetic doctrines.²⁷

As Western culture was becoming slightly more accessible in the Communist East in the early 1960s through sporadically published translations and occasionally organized museum exhibitions, Soviet theatre companies began to tackle—albeit somewhat cautiously—unfamiliar themes and explore innovative aesthetics.²⁸ Sovremennik's production of Albee's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in 1967 turned a page in the history of Soviet theatre: the play's tragic sensibility and the characters' complicated, often irrational, feelings and unexplained motives challenged the positivist ideology of socialist realism. When the plays of European absurdists such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco were mostly unknown to Soviet readers and spectators, Albee's work—although in the form of adaptation²⁹—introduced aspects of absurdist sensibility to Soviet theatre makers and audiences.³⁰ The show was initially banned,

26 The word "sovremennik" means "contemporary" in Russian.

27 Russian theatre scholar Anatoly Smeliansky writes that Sovremennik became "the hearth and home" of the sixties generation in the Soviet Union, as many young writers, artists, and musicians enthusiastically gathered around this theatre and brought their work to be produced on its stage. Many of these artists "would later become dissidents and leave the country, voluntarily or otherwise" (Anatoly Smeliansky, *The Russian Theatre after Stalin*, trans. Patrick Miles, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 18).

28 The post-thaw period also marked the development of Soviet drama that called for honesty and truthful representation of characters in their struggle to achieve self-fulfillment and remain socially responsible for their individual decisions. Among the Soviet playwrights who emerged during this time were Victor Rozov, Aleksandr Volodin, and Aleksandr Vampilov.

29 It is ironic that it was Albee's adaptation of McCullers's gothic novella—rather than his original work—that turned to be the first engagement of Moscow theatre audiences with Albee's dramatic canon.

30 The sensibility of absurdism was not an entirely unknown phenomenon in Soviet culture. In *Russian Tragifarce: Its Cultural and Political Roots* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna

but the decision was soon reversed, allowing for public performances. Albee remembered this experience after he traveled to the Soviet Union to see the *Sovremennik* version, only to find that the production was cut. "The production eventually opened ... but I am still perplexed why it was censored in the first place. I never wrote about the life of Soviet people. I wrote about the absurdity of life in general."³¹ But he also remembered many spirited conversations with the talented young cast, the beginning of a long friendship with the company. For the Soviet actors, who warmly welcomed Albee to their artistic family and hosted boisterous parties after each show, their interactions with the playwright remained one of the most important events of the era.³² In the country behind the Iron Curtain, which was essentially closed to direct communication with foreigners, Albee, somewhat curiously, was presented with a unique opportunity to interact with artists who had shaken up Moscow theatrical circles with their boldness and innovation.³³ This unexpected creative relationship between a controversial American writer and an alternative Moscow theatre company cemented their friendship and fostered the environment that led to future experimentation in Soviet theatrical culture.

Galina Volchek remembers that her portrayal of Miss Amelia—a shrewd, fearsome businesswoman hopelessly in love with a hunch-backed dwarf who claims to be her distant relative—was an extraordinary experience that shaped her acting identity.³⁴ With material whose themes and style were unfamiliar to the company, the work that was filled with ambiguity and often unexplained psychological cruelty required a different approach to developing a role, crafting relationships with other characters, and engaging an audience far removed from any American context in a painful story of unfortunate love

University Press, 2000), I argue that the Oberiu, the last Soviet avant-garde group before the imposition of socialist realism in the USSR in the 1930s, preceded Western absurdist theatre that was to become canonized several decades later in the works of Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco by Martin Esslin's seminal study, *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

31 Aleksandr Sirotin, "Pamayatnye vstrechi: Edward Albee. Ballada o neveselom dramaturge." [Memorable visits: Edward Albee. The ballad of the sad dramatist] (*Chaika*, October 15, 2106), <https://www.chayka.org/node/7576>.

32 See in "O neveselom kabachke i prochem obschepite" [Of the sad café and other eateries], December 14, 2003, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2003/12/15/16200-o-neveselom-kabachke-i-prochem-obschepite>.

33 Albee's visits to the USSR (particularly the one at the time of Kennedy's assassination) and intimate artistic association with Soviet writers and artists might have resulted in his inclusion on a CIA watch list, on which he remained for four years until 1971. <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/releases/157-10014-10186.pdf>.

34 Gleb Skorohodov, *Galina Volchek. V zerkale nelepom i tragichesko* [Galina Volchek. In an awkward and tragic mirror] (Moscow: LitRes, 2017), https://books.google.com/books/about/Галина_Волчек_В_зерка.html?id=pTonDgAAQBAJ.

and betrayal in the stifling rural South. As Stephen Bottoms suggests, "set in a town 'that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world,' McCullers's Southern-gothic novella relies on and revels in the creation ... of an eerily mysterious atmosphere." Pointing to the characters' peculiar, somewhat "freakish" qualities, Bottoms argues that "the narrative teases the reader with veiled allusions of their queerly unnatural desires."³⁵ Albee lightened McCullers's Southern Gothic style in his "broadly realistic adaptation"³⁶ of the novella and set the play in a single recognizable location, Miss Amelia's "sad café." Still, this dramatic material, in which irrational forces and repressed sexual desires control the characters' impetuous decisions and create a striking sense of unpredictability, incongruity, and doom, clashed with the expectation that Soviet theatre should embrace linear, cause-and-effect dramaturgy and create socially minded, realistic characters in a well-defined ideological framework.

The choice of play at a Moscow theatre in the late 1960s indeed might have been unexpected. Critic A. Yakubovsky applauded the theatre's attempt to highlight the play's social context, but he also recognized the contradictions between the performance practices of Soviet theatres charged with presenting social conflicts in a clear-cut realistic fashion, on one hand, and Albee's psychologically complex, sometimes explosive, storytelling that frequently offered social critique but was always devoid of straightforward ideological messages, on the other.³⁷ Drawing connections between Albee's work and the theatre of the absurd, Yakubovsky pointed to the actors' challenges in grappling with the kind of extreme psychological brutality—the "American version of 'theatre of cruelty'" —that was manifested in Albee's adaptation through the disturbing, cruel actions of his characters.³⁸

What drew the actors to this lesser known work of American theatre? Why did their emerging theatre company in an urban center of the Communist state tackle a play whose social milieu is a remote rural town in capitalist America? Did the actors seek to explore realities other than their own? Did they search for dramatic characters whose passions reached beyond the commonplace of socialist realist drama? Were they drawn to portraying the sexually ambiguous relationships between Cousin Lymon, a freakish hunchback,

35 Stephen J. Bottoms, "Albee's monster children: Adaptations and confrontations," *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 130.

36 Ibid.

37 A. Yakubovsky, "Albee v 'Sovremennike'" [Albee at Sovremennik], *Sovetskaya kultura*, 11 July 1967.

38 Ibid.

and Marvin Macy, Amelia's estranged husband, particularly as homosexuality was a forbidden subject in the Soviet Union? These questions remain largely hypothetical but what seems clear is that the actors' training in Stanislavskian psychological realism helped them connect the disjointed threads of the story and explore the emotional truth of characters whose actions are often driven by dark, mysterious passions. In Volchek's performance, for instance, the audience saw a deeply troubled but charismatic and affectionate Miss Amelia who profoundly and passionately, but so awkwardly and hopelessly, desired to love and be loved. "She was a monster in my production; here she is a deeply suffering individual," said Alan Schneider, who directed the first production of *Sad Café* in the United States.³⁹

According to the actors, Albee also wholeheartedly appreciated this interpretation, although it perhaps offered less ambiguity and more causal connection than what he had envisioned. In the complexities of Miss Amelia rendered through Volchek's nuanced performance, he saw a few characteristics of Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He inscribed his copy of *Virginia Woolf* for the actress during one of his visits to the Soviet Union: "To My Russian Martha. But when?"⁴⁰ It was indeed Volchek's dream to play Martha in *Virginia Woolf*, and for many years Sovremennik planned to produce it, but the play—considered too thematically controversial or emotionally explosive for the Soviet audience—ran afoul of the official censors or the lack of a director who would accept the challenge. The play finally went into rehearsal in 1983 under the direction of Valery Fokin, and in late 1984, almost two decades after the Moscow premiere of *Sad Café*, Volchek captivated Moscow spectators with her powerful performance of Martha in a much-celebrated production. Volchek discovered "Martha's tragedy" in the character's love for George—the deep, boundless, and everlasting love that transcended betrayals, cruel psychological games, and denials. Critics lauded Volchek's ability to reveal the tragic subtleties of her role, to create a complicated subtext of Martha's emotional journey, to embrace "the fullness of [her] suffering and the emptiness of [her] happiness."⁴¹

The Sovremennik *Virginia Woolf* was not the first staging of the play in the Soviet Union. In an interview with Albee on his visit to Moscow in 1977, there is a passing reference to a performance of *Virginia Woolf* the same year by a group of actors from the Vakhtangov theatre, who presented their staged reading at

39 Skorohodov, *Galina Volchek. V zerkale nelepom i tragicheskome*.

40 Ibid.

41 A. Karaulov, "Uprek" [Reproach], *Teatral'naya zhizn'* 2 (January 1988): 19.

Moscow's Central House of Actors.⁴² Critics also noted "a sprinkling of productions in Riga and in provincial Russian cities beginning in the mid-1970s."⁴³ By the mid-1980s, American playwriting was no longer an unknown phenomenon, and the increasing number of plays by Americans, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams among them, on Soviet stages drew critics' attention and compelled them to articulate this turn to a greater cultural freedom. Plays by Miller and Williams, particularly in often simplified and ideologically driven Soviet interpretations, seemed to fit the familiar framework of realist drama; Albee's work, however, with its blend of realism, symbolic imagery, and absurdist undertones, continued to puzzle audiences and unsettle critics.

An interregnum separating Leonid Brezhnev's years of stagnation and Mikhail Gorbachev's era of glasnost and perestroika, the mid-'80s were politically unpredictable, as power was peacefully transferred three times in as many years. But the period that precipitated the country's democratization in the late 1980s and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet empire offered the artists a long-awaited opportunity to push a bit more forcefully against ideological borders and explore new forms. Recognizing the emergence of a more democratic thinking, theatre critics and scholars promoted a new appreciation of Western literature and a more complex understanding of humankind that was torn by tragic contradictions, deep-seated fears, and uncertainties but was also full of hope and optimism for a better future. Articles in major newspapers traced theatrical contacts with American dramaturgy, reassessing the significance of earlier attempts at staging American plays. Theatre historian and critic Boris Lyubimov, in a conversation with Vitaly Vulf, who translated a large number of Albee's plays including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* into Russian, noted how in 1967 the Soviet theatre—perhaps for the first time—encountered in *Sad Café* disturbing issues related to human sub-consciousness and repressed sexuality that Soviet culture had largely avoided.⁴⁴ A deeper appreciation gradually emerged for Albee's resistance of clear-cut definitions in character portrayal and his requirement that theatres embrace the absurdity, incongruity, and playfulness that defy familiar realistic framing shaped by causality and didactic narrative. Vulf regretted, for instance, that the Moscow production of *A Delicate Balance* (1986) in his translation "only captured

42 Vitaly Vulf, "Ia ob'yazatel'no vernus' v Moskvu" [I will definitely come back to Moscow], *Sovetskaya kultura*, July 22, 1977.

43 Alma Law, "On Radzinsky's *Jogging*," *Soviet and East-European Drama, Theatre, and Film* 7, no. 2–3 (1987): 63.

44 Boris Lyubimov and Vitaly Vulf, "Teatral'nyi most" ([Theatrical bridge], *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 10 (1988): 76–82.

[the play's] realistic overtone" but failed to explore its existential aspects.⁴⁵ Soviet critics also noted with satisfaction that Albee's work, well received in the Soviet Union and Europe, was not understood or accepted in his own country; the playwright's disheartened and cynical view of America—"conformist," grim, and "passive"—clashed with "the ultra-patriotism" of President Ronald Reagan's administration.⁴⁶

As Albee's plays gained wider acceptance in the official Soviet culture by the mid-1980s, the works of European absurdist remained largely unpublished. Beckett's plays were still a rare occasion in Soviet theatres and, if produced, had a short life on small stages of underground theatre collectives or student theatre companies.⁴⁷ The production of Jean Genet's *The Maids* at Moscow's Satyricon Theatre in 1988 became an epochal theatrical event that bewildered and enraptured audiences. The works of Eastern European absurdist Sławomir Mrożek and Václav Havel were just beginning to appear on experimental stages. Although Albee's association with the European theatre of the Absurd followed him in the United States and abroad, what Richard Coe calls Albee's "parabolic realism"⁴⁸—his stylistic marker to express the absurdity of human existence—distinguished his plays' recognizable worlds and identifiable characters from the metaphysical void of European absurdist⁴⁹ and allowed some of his work to evade censorship.

In Albee's dramatic world of *Virginia Woolf*, Soviet theatre artists sought the material that would challenge them to explore the depth of the human psyche through "the principle of theatrical game-playing."⁵⁰ Reviewers, however, continued to underline the play's critique of American society—its bourgeois degradation and moral decay—and highlight the cruel realities of ruthless

45 Ibid.

46 Vitaly Vulf, "Kompas ego trevog: Applodiruyut v Vienne, ne prinemayut v New Yorke" [The compass of his anxieties: applauding in Vienna, rejecting in New York], *Sovetskaya kultura*, January 12, 1985.

47 This pattern would gradually shift: Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* was staged in 1987 at the Mossovet Theatre, one of Moscow's established theatre companies, and in the two years Moscow saw four productions of *Waiting for Godot*.

48 Richard Coe, "Beyond Absurdity: Albee's Awareness of *Tiny Alice*," *Modern Drama* 18, no. 4 (1975): 371–383.

49 See also David A. Crespy, "Coming Back a Short Distance Correctly: Albee's Absurdist Adventures in Berlin, Moscow, and Vienna" (*Edward Albee and Absurdism* [Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2017]: 126–142) for a detailed discussion about Albee's linkage to the Theatre of the Absurd.

50 Stephen J. Bottoms, *Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

capitalism that ruled out the power of love and kindness.⁵¹ But Soviet rhetoric began to shift, and ideological changes informed the evolving critical opinion about new theatrical developments. Commenting on the simplicity of Sovremennik's staging, which relied on the brilliant artistry of performers,⁵² a few critics pointed to a different kind of theatrical aesthetic that Albee's innovative dramaturgy called for. Vidas Siliunas observed that in Sovremennik's production of *Virginia Woolf*, "the constant, sudden, and unpredictable shifts of [the characters'] human emotions" found their expression through the vortex of unrelenting game-playing that overpowered and enslaved the characters until they were ultimately confronted by the game's "inevitable finality."⁵³ He alluded to the theatrical novelty of the staging, which vigorously exploded the established conventions of causality, and specifically praised the production's unpredictable dramatic collisions, complex metaphors, and wicked, merciless games that the actors performing the characters of Martha and George played so masterfully, enacting lies and self-denials, but also professing their characters' deep love to each other.⁵⁴

4 In Conversation: Texts and Contexts

As Bottoms reminds us in his extensive production history of *Virginia Woolf*, "the cultural-historical factors play ... a significant role in shaping the way the [dramatic work] is perceived."⁵⁵ Albee's plays produced in the Soviet Union often interacted with the country's social context and cultural history, which in many ways informed the audience's relationship with his dramaturgy. More theatres in the 1980s, in Moscow and other cities, were staging Albee's work, contributing to exciting intertextual and intercultural exchanges. Perhaps the more notable Albee productions during the last decade of the Soviet period were *All Over* at the Moscow Art Theatre (1979), *A Delicate Balance* at the Ermolova Theatre in Moscow (1986), *Everything in the Garden* at Moscow's

51 Mikhail Shvydkoi, "Geroi—dalekii i blizkie" [Characters—faraway and nearby], *Pravda*, July 22, 1985.

52 Russian theatre critic Polina Bogdanova observes that the shaping of an outstanding acting ensemble was Fokin's most significant directing achievement in Moscow's production of *Virginia Woolf* (Polina Bogdanova, *Rezhissery-semidesyatniki* [The directors of the 1970s], Moscow: Novoye literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014).

53 Vidas Siliunas, "Konez igry" [The end of the game], *Sovetskaya kultura*, February 26, 1985.

54 Ibid.

55 Bottoms, *Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 3.

New Dramatic Theatre (1985),⁵⁶ *The Zoo Story* at the New Youth Theatre in Perm (1988), and *Lolita*, Albee's adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, at the Liteiny Theatre in Leningrad (1991).

In most instances, a different cultural context offered new possibilities in interpretation and audience perception. Featuring the legendary Moscow Art Theatre performers Maria Babanova, Mikhail Bolduman, Ananstasya Georgievskaya, Mark Prudkin, and Angelina Stepanova, *All Over* was strikingly evocative of Chekhovian drama, with its wistful sensibility, quiet lyricism, and masterfully layered subtext—the company's prominent aesthetic markers. Selected primarily for Babanova to perform the role of the Wife of the dying man, this production also became a swan song for this remarkable actress, whose talent had been recognized by Meyerhold in the 1920s, when he cast her in his celebrated production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.⁵⁷ Critics applauded the extraordinary ensemble of actors but particularly noted Babanova's "charisma, femininity, and virtuosic mastery," which enlivened the play's rather "predictable" dramatic constructs and turned the production into an "alive and exhilarating" theatrical experience.⁵⁸

As scholar Brenda Murphy suggests, the action in *All Over* revolves around "the ritual of waiting," in which the family is poised in tragic anticipation of the man's death.⁵⁹ The play invokes existentialist themes developed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett and is tinged with the symbolist undertones fashioned by modernists Maurice Maeterlinck and Valery Bryusov. Directed by John Gielgud in 1971, the first American production closed after only 42 performances despite Harold Clurman's exclamation that Gielgud's theatrical realization "conveys an existential shudder which has its origin in the soul's dark solitude."⁶⁰ The Soviet version advanced other theatrical associations, placing it in direct conversation with the theatrical history of the Moscow Art Theatre. In addition to its overwhelmingly Chekhovian mood filled with poetic understatement, unexpressed inner struggle, and tragic pathos, the production reminded the audience of the theatre's recent staging of *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Williams and *A Solo for the Clock*, a melancholy musing on old age, loneliness, and the anticipation of dying by the Czechoslovakian playwright Osvald

56 This was not the first production of this play on the Soviet stage. Paverman refers to the 1972 production of *Everything in the Garden* at the State Dramatic Theatre in Kalinin, now Perm (Paverman, *Dramaturgiya Edvarda Albee 60-x godov*).

57 Vitaly Vulf, *Serebryanniy Shar* [The silver globe] (Moscow: Avantitil, 2003).

58 T. Makarova, "Sozvezdie" [Constellation], *Sovetskaya kultura*, February 1, 1980.

59 Brenda Murphy, "Albee's Threnodies: *Box-Mao-Box*, *All Over*, *The Lady from Dubuque*, and *Three Tall Women*," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 95.

60 Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey*, 285.

Zahradník.⁶¹ All three productions shared some cast members and offered a similar lyrical quality and philosophic contemplation of the search for life's meaning and dignity in old age.

Plays such as *All Over* and *Lolita*, which did not receive an enthusiastic response from audiences or critics in the United States, drew a different reception from Soviet spectators. Shirley Burke observes that the Leningrad production of *Lolita* "did not meet with the protests, picketers, scathing reviews, and disappointed audiences of the controversial short-lived production directed by Frank Dunlop on Broadway in 1981."⁶² She attributes the play's success to "a difference in production style, moral sensibility, lack of feminist advocates, or the passage of time." Also, Burke points to the audience's possible "unfamiliarity with the original text"⁶³—because Nabokov's works were previously banned in the Soviet Union, spectators could hardly compare the production with the novel written in 1955. "The surreal style and ironic tone"⁶⁴ of this imaginative staging further distinguished this production from the Broadway one; the set—a "raked turntable segmented with platforms of various heights,"⁶⁵ erotic sculpture, red rocking chair, and a multitude of mirrors placed at different angles—was reminiscent of early Soviet avant-garde designs for the productions of Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, and Tairov. As Albee's *Lolita* navigated a series of complicated cultural turns, it provided a unique theatrical lens to the Soviet audience, invoking parallels with the country's earlier innovative cultural and literary traditions that had been erased from Soviet consciousness for decades.

In the late 1980s, Albee's plays unexpectedly found themselves firmly placed in the context of "the New Wave" in Soviet theatre that emerged in the last couple of years of the Soviet regime and paved the way for bold, raw, critically minded, and fiercely experimental Russian playwriting, which came to be recognized as New Drama.⁶⁶ In the turbulent period of perestroika, the uncompromising voices of writers such as Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and Nina Sadur burst onto the theatrical scene, raising poignant questions about the dangerous absurdity of Soviet political discourse. Their plays confronted audiences with

61 Vulf, "Angelina Stepanova," *Teatr* 11 (1980): 73–87.

62 Shirley Burke, "The Leningrad Leteiny's *Lolita*," *Soviet and East European Performance* 11, no. 2 (1991): 49.

63 *Ibid.*, 50.

64 *Ibid.*, 49.

65 Joanna Rott, *Scene Change: A Theatre Diary: Prague, Moscow, Leningrad* (New York: Lime-light Editions, 1994), 118.

66 See John Freedman, "Contemporary Russian Drama: The Journey from Stagnation to A Golden Age," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 3 (2010): 389–420; Yana Ross, "Russia's New Drama from Togliatti to Moscow," *Theater* 36, no. 1 (2006): 27–43.

unsettling images of the country's social and economic collapse and painted an excruciatingly dark, distressing picture of Soviet life in urban centers and remote provinces. The sometimes harsh, jarring tone of Albee's plays and his own dark perception of human existence reverberated with the pessimistic perspectives of Soviet theatre artists in the final years of the country. There are curious connections, for instance, between *Jogging* (1986), a four-character play by Soviet writer Edvard Radzinsky about a "vicious battle of the sexes," and *Virginia Woolf*. Seeing Albee's play for the first time, Radzinsky recalls: "The production was in Romanian, a language I didn't know. Nevertheless, I understood everything, every word. The play seemed very close to me, and it threw me into despair, *because I hadn't written it*."⁶⁷

Noticing the unmistakable parallels between the two works, American critics nevertheless recognized that the Soviet play "appears to be ... a simplified version of *Virginia Woolf*," but is "a very subtle, multidimensional, almost encoded commentary on Soviet society."⁶⁸ A representation of Radzinsky's bleak vision of the country controlled by the corrupt political elite, *Jogging* (or *Sporting Scenes of 1981*, as the play was known in the Soviet Union) was staged at the Ermolova Theatre in 1986 by Fokin—the same director who only a few years ago had led the Sovremennik production of *Virginia Woolf*. Alma Law, who traces Albee's influence on Radzinsky's playwriting, stresses the impact of Radzinsky's work on Soviet spectators who were "shocked and titillated by the [characters'] blatant cynicism and greed" they had not been accustomed to seeing on Soviet stages, especially in the productions portraying Soviet society.⁶⁹

The absurdity of Soviet life with its tragic incongruities and sarcastic undertones was also invoked in Boris Milgram's staging of Albee's *The Zoo Story* in 1988 in a provincial theatre of Perm, on the outskirts of the Soviet empire. In Milgram's minimalist staging—three chairs symbolizing a park bench on a bare stage—Jerry's audacious but desperate "clowning" and Peter's "sombambular" complacency reminded audiences of the absurdities and hopelessness of their everyday existence, serving as a mirror to contemplate "our understanding of decency, our attempts for dignity, and our cruel kindness."⁷⁰ Milgram was a student of Anatoly Vasiliev, whose productions of *Cerceanu* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* fascinated Western audiences in the late 1980s, and he approached *The Zoo Story* in dialogue with his accomplished

67 Law, "On Radzinsky's *Jogging*," 63. All italics are original.

68 Lisa Portes, "The Poetry of Infidelity," *Soviet and East-European Drama, Theatre, and Film* 7, no. 2–3 (1987): 64.

69 Law, "On Radzinsky's *Jogging*," 62–63.

70 Anna Stepanova, "Bezdnaya zhisn' s blestiaschim finalom" [The wasted life with a brilliant finale], *Teatral'naya zhisn'* 9 (May 1990): 18–19.

master. The jazz accompaniment that underscored the production, informing the improvisatory acting and culminating in Glenn Miller's timeless recording of "Chattanooga Choo Choo," was reminiscent of Vasiliev's 1979 production of Viktor Slavkin's *The Grown-up Daughter of a Young Man*, which infused the essence of jazz in the depiction of Soviet subculture.⁷¹ In the spirit of contemporary Soviet absurdism, Milgram's staging of Albee's early work, which blends stark naturalism and bitter, absurdist irony,⁷² powerfully resonated with the new Soviet dramaturgy.

5 Epilogue: Sites of Possibility

In 2012, almost 40 years after the first publication of Albee's work in Russian, Russian readers were introduced to a collection of his plays that included *Seascape*, *Three Tall Women*, and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* By then, Albee's plays had been staged throughout the country, and Russian theatre critics no longer felt the pressure to frame Albee's existential themes or allegorical references in a socially realistic perspective. As Russian theatre directors continue to find new meaning and stylistic possibility in Albee, his theatre becomes increasingly interwoven with new social, political, and cultural contexts in post-Soviet Russia. Inviting unlikely parallels from an American classic and a New Russian Drama, director Mark Rozovsky pairs his staging of *Virginia Woolf* (2000) with *Black Milk* (2002), a work by contemporary Russian playwright Vassily Sigarev, whose plays unnerve audiences with their "haunting snapshots of teenagers, drug addicts, and marginal characters who live behind the 'barbed wire' of socially accepted terms."⁷³ In his deconstructed vision of *Virginia Woolf* (2015), in which characters interact with multiple doppelgangers,⁷⁴ Vladimir Pankov boldly blends different theatrical aesthetics—psychological realism, Brechtian distancing, clowning, and jazz improvisations—creating a postmodern hodgepodge of voices and visual overstimulation that echoes the fragmentation of Russia's contemporary society.

71 Marina Dmitrievskaya, "Shest' personazhei v poiskax mastera" [Six characters in search of a master], *Moskovskii nablyudatel'* 2 (1991): C.10–16.

72 Martin Esslin noted "bitter irony" of *The Zoo Story* when he placed Albee "in the category of the Theatre of the Absurd" but he also pointed to the "realism of [the play's] dialogue and its subject matter" (*The Theatre of The Absurd* [New York: Vintage Books, 2001, 312]).

73 Ross, "Russia's New Drama from Togliatti to Moscow," 30.

74 One would suspect that this deconstructed staging of *Virginia Woolf* escaped the playwright's attention. Albee was notorious for forbidding most attempts to meddle with his work in production.

Kama Ginkas places his ascetic, minimalist production of *All Over* (2017) in an intimate conversation with his staging of *Virginia Woolf* (2014), both at Moscow's Theatre of the Young Spectator—an existential diptych that plunges the audience in a vortex of absurd impossibilities and metaphysical allegories. In *Virginia Woolf*, “life erupted ... furiously and destructively and the characters burned themselves to the ashes only to rise again for their new and cruel games”; in *All Over*, “the time passes painfully slow ... and only occasionally the fear of death and loneliness breaks through in a hysterical explosion.”⁷⁵ Ginkas notes how an “absolutely intimate ... family story” in *All Over* “grows into a real tragedy ... reaching the level of Greek tragic plays.”⁷⁶ Set in the same non-traditional space—the small, crowded foyer of the theatre—both productions heighten the intimacy of the relationship and intensify the characters' sense of confinement, revealing the fine, often barely recognizable, line between life and death, game-playing and destruction.

The concept of intertextuality proposes an understanding of the text as a “dynamic site” in constant interaction with a network of other texts (and contexts), rather than as a hermetically closed, “cohesive, and self-contained unit of meaning.”⁷⁷ A vision of text as fluid and evolving perhaps contradicts Albee's own artistic position that “in proper performance *all* should vanish—acting, direction, design, *even* writing⁷⁸—all we should be left with [is] the author's intention uncluttered.”⁷⁹ Many intertextual encounters, however, shaped the journey of Albee's plays in Russia during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. As his work traveled through literary translations and theatrical adaptations in the Soviet Union and Russia, new meanings and interpretations emerged, sparking theatrical innovation and inspiring generations of artists to create unique and exciting theatre in the cultural and political environments of the Cold War and beyond.

75 Anna Banaciukevich, “Kto boitsiy Edvarda Albee? Strah smerti i nenavist' k sebe v spektakle ‘Vse koncheno’” [Who is afraid of Edward Albee? Fear of death and self-hatred in the production of *All Over*], Lenta.Ru, January 28, 2017, http://www.smotr.ru/2016/2016_tuz_vse.htm.

76 Igor Yakulovich, “Kama Ginkas predstavil spektakl' ‘Vse koncheno’ po p'ece Edvarda Albee” [Kama Ginkas staged a production of *All Over* by Edward Albee], *News in culture*, January 19, 2017, https://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/164630/.

77 María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, “Intertextuality: Origins And Development of The Concept,” *Atlantis* 18, no. 1–2 (1996): 268.

78 Italics are original.

79 Albee, *Stretching My Mind* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 257.

The (Mis)Representation of Edward Albee in Spain, 1963–2010

Ramón Espejo Romero

Abstract

That Edward Albee's work displays a singular and complex blend of styles and forms (Naturalism not excluded) is a well-known fact. His role as a dramatic and theatrical innovator, at least in part, hinges precisely upon his not holding on to one sensibility but rather experimenting and blending forms. To ignore the latter when producing his plays would constitute a betrayal of his uniqueness, let alone his idiosyncrasy. As this paper will prove, this is precisely what happened in Spain, a part of whose theatrescape the American playwright has been for nearly sixty years. To begin with, the Albee canon which Spanish audiences have been served was one underscoring the idea of him being a largely (almost exclusively) naturalistic playwright. While this may be slightly unfair even in the case of a play such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, it is even more so with more the unconventional *The Zoo Story* or *The Goat*. The strategies of his character as a dramatic and theatrical innovator, which were deemphasized in Spain, will be unpacked, as well as the motivations behind such a widespread approach to staging his plays. At first, it was a matter of how provincial Spanish theatrical culture was, a consequence of repression, censorship and a long dictatorship that doggedly promoted the most rigorous mediocrity in the arts. While in ensuing periods political circumstances were to change radically, who Albee was, theatrically speaking, largely remained unaltered.

American theater—as opposed to European theater—is based on naturalism. We don't like the political, intellectual theater of Brecht: we don't like the stylized theater of the European avant-garde much. We like good, old-fashioned naturalistic plays. Any play that wanders far from those boundaries is in trouble.

EDWARD ALBEE, Interview with Steve Capra¹



¹ Albee, "Interview with Steve Capra," in *Stretching My Mind* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005), 179.

Whether, and in what measure, Edward Albee is a theatrical and dramatic innovator is a matter, first, of his willingness to be one; secondly, of the critical consensus that may be built (and probably has already been built) around such a notion; and, also importantly, of the audience's perception (general or more specialized audiences) of his being so. I take it for granted that stage realities are hardly complete unless they are perceived as such by those whom theatrical and dramatic communication targets: audiences, critics, scholars, playwrights, other members of the theatrical profession. My concern here is not so much with the inherent nature of Albee's work but with how it has been interpreted on the stage and received in Spain. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, for various reasons to be duly explained, Edward Albee's character as a truly innovative and unique playwright has been all but obscured in Spain, where he has been produced as one merely continuing in the footsteps of a tradition of American realistic and naturalistic theatre of which Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams were posited as the most distinguished representatives. Throughout the paper, I will argue that the latter angle is not completely misguided but rather constitutes just one single facet of our playwright's complex and multifarious theatrical sensibility. In Spain, however, this has remained *the* only way Albee has been perceived by professionals of the Spanish theatre and, consequently, by the audiences who have had access to his plays through the former's distorted gaze.

Albee has indeed been a part of Spanish theatrical life for over fifty years. This paper attempts to trace a provisional history, largely unaccounted for so far, of the playwright's evolving role in Spanish theatre (more detailed research into specific productions are needed, though). Pursuing to the view stated above, I will forgo a chronological survey of every production but will discuss them in the way that can best show how Albee's peculiar theatrical idiosyncrasy has not been acknowledged, heeded, understood, or embraced in Spain. His having been relegated to a mere footnote to Tennessee Williams, or, even worse, to the author of a play which eventually became a famous movie (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), is disappointing but might be the case with other countries as well. It is my wish that this essay will spur a much-needed re-evaluation of the playwright's work around the world and of his presence and significance on worldwide stages.

In order to grasp the disappointing history of Albee's plays on the Spanish stage, it is necessary to review his position in American theatre, specifically his innovative mixing of naturalistic dramaturgy with styles associated with the theatre of the absurd. To many, Albee's place within modern American drama looks like a bridge between the likes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill and the new, postmodern aesthetics that have been

sweeping American stages ever since the late 1960s.² He possessed a keen eye to spot within American theatrical tradition everything still worth retaining, setting him apart from the more radical experiments of the 1960s. He maintained, “I’ve always thought that it was one of the responsibilities of playwrights to show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they’ll change it.”³ This cannot but bear echoes of Arthur Miller, who would often insist on the same idea. For all Albee’s innovative approach to the dramatic art, Christopher Bigsby notes, “Albee could hardly be so disenchanted by people if he didn’t expect better of them. At heart he is an idealist on the side of the angels, even though his sharp and outspoken plays would often make the angels blush.”⁴ For Bigsby, Albee came out of the Kennedy years in America and could not but write of “loss, desolation, spiritual depletion,” all the while envisaging, however remote, redemption for his characters.⁵ In 1997, Albee himself declared any play should be “an act of aggression against the status quo—the psychological, philosophical, moral or political status quo,” making us, or inviting us, to think “differently about things.”⁶ These may have been regarded as old-fashioned ideals by more than one playwright, artist, or critic in the 1960s. By then, it had become rather commonplace to argue that complaining about the state of things was futile, the senselessness of the contemporary world merely to be embraced, mocked perhaps, but never in the belief that things could, or should, be any different than they were.

As no great writer or artist is ever content with just taking over where his predecessors left off, Albee famously noted that a good playwright needs not only to make “some statement about the condition of ‘man’” but also to “try

2 Albee felt for Williams an admiration verging on idolatry throughout the 1950s. Cf. Richard Amacher, *Edward Albee*, trans. León Miras (Buenos Aires: Fabril, 1971), 24. As for O’Neill, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has been consistently compared to *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* in spite of Albee’s insistence that *The Iceman Cometh* had inspired him more. In an interview for *Catch*, he declared all of his work to be written so as to refute O’Neill’s belief in pipe dreams; in Albee’s opinion, people do need pipe dreams, “but I think they have the responsibility to know that they are kidding themselves and then go right on kidding themselves.” Cf. Albee, “Conversation with *Catch*,” in *Stretching My Mind*, 98.

3 Albee, “Sir John Gielgud and Edward Albee Discuss the Stage Today,” *The Observer*, April 8, 1965, 21.

4 Tom Prideaux, “The Albee Attitude, Both Sweet and Sour,” *Life*, December 14, 1962, 110.

5 C. W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945–1990* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 127–128.

6 Thomas P. Adler, “Albee’s 3 1/2: The Pulitzer Prize,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Stephen J. Bottoms (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

to alter the forms within which his precursors have had to work.”⁷ While not ignoring valuable lessons from his artistic legacy, Albee pushed the envelope towards aesthetic realms rarely if ever visited before in American drama. The conventional nature of the theatre is paramount in Albee’s mind, and he repeatedly introduces actions, lines, and characters who are not at all lifelike, who call attention to the illusory nature of the medium. They remind us that an artist has fashioned everything we see onstage, counteracting the make-believe world that stories often induce. In Albee’s universe, the real and the unreal, the truthful and the fanciful, are always held in suspension, in a “delicate balance.” His plays mesmerize us but often while also shaking us out of our complacency. With such an ear for writing good dialogue, the disturbing nature of the situations he conjures before us comes off as even more eerie and surreal.

As noted, the 1960s, both in Europe and America, took refuge in a meaninglessness, the artistic potential of which was fully explored. When Paddy Chayevsky wrote his 1959 *The Tenth Man*, he formulated the following rationale for what was happening to American theatre at the time (all the more surprising to find it precisely in a play that was a largely conventional Broadway comedy):

Historically speaking, an era of prosperity following an era of hard times usually produces a number of despairing and quietistic philosophies, for the now prosperous people have found out they are just as unhappy as when they were poor. Thus when an intelligent man of such a generation discovers that two television sets have no more meaning than one or that he gets along no better with his wife in a suburban house than he did in their small city flat, he arrives at the natural assumption that life is utterly meaningless.⁸

As a playwright occupying a middle ground between those who still believed denouncing the ills of society served some purpose and subsequent ones for whom there was no point in even bothering (Bottoms calls it “Albee’s unusual ability to fuse social relevance with existential profundity”⁹), Albee combines in most of his work a faint hope that society can be improved with a postmodernist joy in the meaninglessness and senselessness of much that surrounds us and lays claim to meaning.¹⁰

7 Albee, “Sir John Gielgud,” 21.

8 Paddy Chayevsky, *The Tenth Man* (New York: Random House, 1960), 105.

9 Bottoms, “Introduction: The Man Who Had Three Lives,” in *Cambridge Companion*, 9.

10 Ibid.

Both drives within Albee's artistic agenda find expression in the blending of naturalism with what Philip C. Kolin calls a "hypnotic, surrealistic undercoating."¹¹ Gerry McCarthy refers to the same idea but words it differently, contrasting the "accessible Albee" with the "more hermetic and abstract Albee."¹² In the prologue to his monumental biography of Albee, Mel Gussow identified Chekhov, Pirandello, and Beckett as paramount influences over the playwright ("Chekhov for his plays of character and apparent inaction, Pirandello for his treatment of reality and illusion, Beckett for both those reasons plus his language and humor").¹³ With such a gamut of literary forefathers, one is not to wonder at his stylistic hybridity. Sometimes the specific production by means of which a play is served can make all the difference between emphasizing one or another style. And some plays are clearly more suited to a naturalistic approach than others, the staging of which demands more of an effort on the part of directors in order to gauge what Albee might have intended, or just to maintain his ambiguity.

Albee's language is generally acknowledged as his major contribution to American drama, not only in terms of its adequacy and force but also in the constant scrutiny to which he subjects it. He probably believed, along with the existentialists, that our alienation from ourselves and from one another stems from how we (mis)use language. From Linda Ben-Zvi's insightful point of view, Albee is at heart a vaudevillian, and that is the source of his linguistic shenanigans. But he offers us vaudeville in contexts where we hardly expect it, be that "a quiet Sunday afternoon in Central Park by a seeming derelict, or at a late-night gathering in a living room in a university town by a middle-aged history professor and his somewhat older wife."¹⁴ After listing some of the props borrowed from vaudeville in Albee's *oeuvre*, Ben-Zvi concludes: "These physical and verbal acts, usually executed in realistic settings and performed by recognizable types, create the same upsetting, disorienting, and explosive effect ... [of] the vaudeville aesthetic: dissolving or calling into question the carefully delineated world of the play, rendering it strange and disturbing."¹⁵ Later on, she claims, "Albee's figures are often unsettling and riveting precisely because of the disparity between their expected modes of behaviour and their

11 Philip C. Kolin, "Albee's Early One-Act Plays: A New American Playwright from Whom Much Is Expected," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 35.

12 Gerry McCarthy, "Minding the Play: Thought and Feeling in Albee's 'Hermetic' Works," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 116.

13 Mel Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 17.

14 Linda Ben-Zvi, "Playing the Cloud Circuit: Albee's Vaudeville Show," in Bottoms, *Cambridge Companion*, 180.

15 *Ibid.*, 181.

shocking, annihilating routines that call into question the reality of the world in which they appear.”¹⁶ Whether or not one believes that the vaudevillian aesthetic is so prominent in Albee, Ben-Zvi captures a duality that does lie at the core of Albee’s dramatic universe.

I would never say there are two Albees, but it is probably not entirely unreasonable to surmise that he is a complex figure, whom we can view in different lights and from various angles. Depending on where we stand we will not see a different Albee, but particular traits will be more conspicuous than others. Maybe the best way to understand him is, as critics have been doing for years, to explore his work without a fixed gaze, trying to do justice to his ever-shifting ideas and aesthetic choices, to the fluidity of his style(s), to the ungraspable nature of his plots and characters, to his ultimate refusal to probe the depths of reality beyond the point where the quest ceases to make sense. A faithful rendition of Albee on a stage should probably cause puzzlement rather than putting us at ease, raise questions rather than providing answers, combine styles and aesthetic choices rather than making a “coherent” stylistic statement. Elusive, rebellious, skeptical, intelligent, irreverent, Albee is among the most iconoclastic of American playwrights, and maybe the full extent of his achievement has not been gauged yet.

1 1963–1970

Having briefly surveyed widespread opinions about Albee as theatrical innovator and, especially, the duality of his clinging to the dramatic tradition vis-a-vis his more radical push, it is time to turn to Albee’s stage history in Spain. In the mid-1960s, that country was timidly emerging from the lethargy induced by decades of ferocious dictatorship. The latter had dedicated strenuous efforts to eradicating the best and most interesting figures of Spanish culture, past and present. Fearful that freedom of speech or artistic expression could endanger the continuity of a shabby and erratic regime, only good at guaranteeing its own survival, Franco’s government banished from the theatre nearly every trace of serious discussion or artistic innovation. After signing a treaty with the US in 1953 that would prop up Franco’s regime for another two decades, American plays and cultural products started to be tolerated, however grudgingly. Owing to it, Miller, Williams, and even O’Neill had become well-known figures in Spain by 1960 (while Bertolt Brecht, for one, was virtually unheard of).

16 Ibid.

By the mid-1960s, a growingly vocal opposition to Franco was making itself felt across public life, from universities to certain periodicals, magazines, even newspapers. Theatre had adopted an oppositional stand almost since the early days of Francoism although its impact among the population at large was for a time negligible. By the 1960s, even venues that had until then been mostly devoted to mindless amusement had started to make room for, and champion, less complacent drama. Meanwhile, the pockets of outright opposition grew more visible and bolder, all of it within the boundaries of what was possible under a government that denied its citizens freedom of expression. A play could be shut down in the blink of an eye by censors merely because a sexual or political allusion was deemed unwholesome or undesirable.

The name Edward Albee appeared in a Spanish periodical in 1965 for the first time. It was in the pages of the most prestigious publication on the performing arts, *Primer acto*. The article “Nuevo teatro U.S.A.” tried to argue that the era of Miller, O’Neill, and Williams was at an end and had been for quite a few years. Written by George E. Wellwarth, an American critic who was cognizant of both Spanish and American drama, the article offered a canon not necessarily substantiated by subsequent developments. For Wellwarth, Albee did have a promising beginning but had ruined it after the highly commercial and bourgeois *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which he “gasta una enorme cantidad de energía pedaleando furiosamente hacia atrás” [consumes a whole lot of energy pedaling backwards, in anger].¹⁷ Wellwarth wished Albee could rid himself of the hideous legacy of Williams and Inge. These two playwrights were identified as the sources of all that was wrong with American drama, and this view would be replicated by critics in years to follow. What is probably most relevant is that Wellwarth’s pioneering approach to Albee, in which the playwright’s apostasy of tradition was given special prominence, would soon be overshadowed by just the opposite assessment.¹⁸

Two years before Wellwarth’s piece, in 1963, a first but unremarkable production of *The Zoo Story* was undertaken by a group of aficionados, the Teatro de los Jóvenes. They offered it alongside *The Sandbox*, both directed by William Layton. Born in Kansas in 1912, Layton brought considerable experience in the US professional theatre to Spain. (Among other things, he was a personal

17 George E. Wellwarth, “Nuevo teatro U.S.A.,” trans. Antonio Monleón, *Primer acto* 68 (1965): 24.

18 In 1966, Lumen brought out George E. Wellwarth’s *Teatro de protesta y paradoja*, the Spanish translation of his *Theater of Protest and Paradox*, not devoted entirely to new American drama but including a chapter on Albee, Arthur Kopit, and Jack Gelber. Alianza re-issued it in 1974. In 1966, Martin Esslin’s *Theater of the Absurd* came out in Barcelona as *El teatro del absurdo*, signaling how Albee was to be approached.

friend to Thornton Wilder.) While in New York, Layton attended the Actors Studio. His acknowledged master was Sanford Meisner, though.¹⁹ Although he began as an actor on Broadway and in the movies throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Layton turned more and more to teaching due to a hearing condition that deteriorated over the years. He set foot in Spain for the first time in 1958, but it would be years before he set up his residence in Madrid, preferring to commute between the latter and New York.

As he explained to José Luis Alonso de Santos in an interview in 1981, Layton found Madrid in the 1960s more in need of what he had to offer than New York, where dozens of acting schools already existed.²⁰ His stays in Spain would become more and more prolonged. At first, he traded plays between the two countries, pitching Spanish plays to New York friends and colleagues and doing the same with American plays in Spain. In 1960, Layton joined the Teatro Estudio de Madrid, active until 1968. Partly a producing unit, partly a school, it offered Layton the chance to train a first generation of Spanish actors, who, in imbibing the ideas of Stanislavski, started to approach their craft in a more systematic way. Layton became a guru for Spanish actors, and up until his death in 1995 he remained a highly respected figure.²¹

Of the two Albee plays performed by the Teatro de los Jóvenes in 1963, *The Sandbox*, titled *La caja de arena*, had far less impact than *The Zoo Story*. The former, highly characteristic of the period, displayed dialogue full of clichés and devoid of meaning, performance without a referent. But the Spanish production, if we are to believe Ricardo Domènech, failed to capture it; for those in attendance, it seemed like a parody of an absurdist play.²² In March, 1966, two theatre companies, Studio-1 and Gogo, both from Barcelona, teamed up

19 Layton's reading of Stanislavski's Method was contained in his *¿Por qué? Trampolín del actor* (1990), a breviarium with the basic notions a Method actor needs to be familiar with. Theatre schools in Spain have never stopped using it, and it has undergone several reprints. Occasional criticism has been levied, however. Adolfo Marsillach wrote in 2003 that Spanish observance of the Method only led to over-the-top but rather meaningless performances. Cf. Adolfo Marsillach, *Un teatro necesario. Escritos sobre teatro de Adolfo Marsillach*, ed. Juan Antonio Hormigón (Madrid: ADE, 2003), 307.

20 José Luis Alonso de Santos, "'El Método' en España," *Primer acto* 188 (February–June 1981), 21.

21 In the early 1970s, Layton's acting lessons became a site of pilgrimage not unlike that of Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio in New York. He worked for all the major schools in Spain (the RESAD in Madrid, the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona, etc.). After the 1970s, a few actors and directors from Argentina would also divulge the Stanislavski cult in Spain, but none of them came to enjoy Layton's fame and predicament.

22 Ricardo Domènech, "'La caja de arena' e 'Historia del zoo,' de Edward Albee," *Primer acto* 48 (December 1963), 60.

to offer a double bill. Studio-1 was in charge of a new rendition of *The Sandbox*, directed and translated by William Frauenfelder. Gogo was responsible for *The American Dream*, directed by Santiago Sans, using Layton's translation as *El sueño americano*. A handful of performances were offered. Once more, *La caja de arena* was treated as the mindless comedy it never was.²³ *The American Dream* did not excite much interest although it was recognized to possess greater merit. As was often the case with minor productions, most of the papers would ignore them, and there were practically no reviews. For reasons that are hard to determine, the two plays have been all but absent from Spanish theatrical life ever since.

As noted, the 1963 Teatro de los Jóvenes production included a *Historia del zoo*. It was a one-off staging, in December 1963, at the Valle-Inclán theatre in Madrid. The group had been working on Albee's text for a year while waiting for the go-ahead from the censors.²⁴ This means that their commitment and artistic rigor should not be doubted, whatever the actual results. Once again, the production went mostly unreported. In a brief notice for *Abc*, Manuel Adrio valued the courage and depth of Albee's original, as well as its intellectual rigor and stylistic eclecticism.²⁵ Other opinions were to become more paradigmatic. Ricardo Domènech was adamant that he was watching a naturalistic piece and hence found fault with all the lines that precluded such an approach.²⁶

A major corollary to that 1963 offering was the publication of Layton's translation in *Primer acto* in 1965,²⁷ in a special issue titled "Teatro U.S.A." Even the cover of that number was devoted to Albee's play, an unusual choice, since covers were often given to major productions. *Primer acto* was signaling to the theatre community, which regularly turned to the journal for information and guidance, that there was a whole new American drama. Oddly, the only "evidence" of its penetration into Spain, and hence the need for it to be featured on the cover, was a production of two years back, and a play only staged once,

23 Santos Hernández, "'The Sandbox,' de Edward Albee," *Primer acto* 74 (1966): 53; Xavier Fàbregas, "'El sueño de América,' de Edward Albee," *Primer acto* 74 (1966): 52.

24 Juan Margallo, "Aunque no tan callando, como se pasa el tiempo," in *Castañuela 70. Esto era España, señores. De Tábano y Las Madres del Cordero*, ed. Santiago Trancón (Madrid: Rama Lama Music, 2006), 343–348.

25 Manuel Adrio, "'Historia del zoo' y 'La caja de arena' en teatro de cámara," *Abc*, December 3, 1963, 79.

26 Domènech, "La caja," 60.

27 The text was published once more in 1991, on the occasion of which Layton detailed the alterations introduced in the 1963 version to secure authorization. Even after he received it, censors expected him to omit some lines explicitly suggesting homosexual liaisons in Jerry's past, and others describing sexual excitement during the attacks by his landlady's dog.

which just a handful of people could see. This goes to show the precariousness of Spanish theatre, the widespread resistance to the new, but also the wish on the part of some to break through that resistance.

Albee himself often championed the reading of plays, which are “complete experiences” in and of themselves, regardless of whether or not, or how, they are performed.²⁸ Notwithstanding, the important consequence of the aforementioned publication is that numerous groups from all across Spain decided to put the script supplied by *Primer acto* to good use, i.e., performed it. Between 1965 and 1970, productions have been documented in Guadalajara, Navarra, Barcelona, Santiago de Compostela, Asturias, León, Melilla, Alicante, Granada, Valencia, Bilbao, Ciudad Real, Valladolid, and of course Madrid, among others.

Its being relatively easy to stage (two benches and a few props are all that is necessary) was part of the appeal. Thematically, it dealt with the demise of meaningful, effective communication in modern societies, stemming from alienation and the stifling character of bourgeois conventions. For Spain, it was an ideal choice, being less confrontational than analogous European work. Leniency from censors could be counted on. By 1969, *Primer acto* referred to *The Zoo Story* as a classic within “amateurismo español” [Spanish amateur theatre].²⁹ However, given the nature of Spanish theatrical culture, the rift between such amateurs and professional players and companies was absolute. Hence, a play such as Albee’s may well have become a cult play among the youth and certain young professionals while not affecting in the least degree the consciousness of paying audiences, who would only attend professional shows and did not read specialized theatre journals. They were interested in the theatre as polite entertainment, and the last thing they would want was for it to challenge the status quo or to be committed and aesthetically or ideologically innovative or challenging. As a consequence, outside limited (although) relevant circles, Albee became the kind of playwright that professional companies might choose to divulge.

The first professional production (which is not to say intelligent or insightful or even competent) of Albee was launched in 1966: *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It mattered little that “the aberrations, the horrors, the mysteries are woven into the fabric of a perfectly normal setting so as to create the illusion of total realism, against which the abnormal and the shocking have even greater impact”³⁰ or that its message was that “life is nothing, and we must have the

28 Albee, “Why Read Plays?,” in *Stretching My Mind*, 255.

29 Anonymous, “De toda España,” *Primer acto* 108 (May 1969): 73.

30 Anne Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 114.

courage to face our emptiness without fear.”³¹ Of equivalent irrelevance was that abundant connections with *The Zoo Story* existed. Almost phrased in the language characteristic of *The Zoo Story* is an exchange between George and Nick:

GEORGE: I've tried to ... tried to reach you ... to ...

NICK: (*contemptuously*) ... make contact?

GEORGE: Yes.

NICK: (*still*) ... communicate?

GEORGE: Yes. Exactly.³²

That Martha and George cannot communicate without violence harks back to the earlier play. It is also the way in which they attempt communication with Nick and Honey: they try to hurt them, hoping to reach out to them. At the same time, the play is an insightful scrutiny into the nature of linguistic communication, of systemic and individual violence, and of gender roles, as “the couple’s intentional theatricalization of their marriage [serves] to problematize [such roles]” and ultimately to expose their inadequacy.³³ Martha keeps shedding one narrative after the other, from the wild young woman who has married the gardener at her college to the obedient daughter whose sole job is to take care of her father, from the dispassionate princess of romance who is to be married to her father’s heir to the flauntingly vulgar and loud humorist, from the weak, dependent and psychologically shattered woman to the master of the house with a whip in her hand, from the drunken adulteress who uses her body to help men sleep their way up the academic ladder to a mock version of the chaste woman who has never been pleased by any man other than her husband, from the spiteful, humiliating daughter of the president of the college to the passionately loving wife who finds her husband cleverer than other men.³⁴ By enacting such roles, Martha exposes the constructedness of gender. She “indulges deeply in the deliberate mimicry of feminine roles which are ...

31 Diana Trilling, “The Riddle of Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,” in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 85.

32 Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 116.

33 Martha Hoorvash and Farideh Pourgivi, “Martha the Mimos: Femininity, Mimesis, and Theatricality in Edward Albee’s *Whos’ Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,” *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 33, no. 2 (December 2011): 17.

34 *Ibid.*, 19.

themselves nothing but mimicry, and by doing so she fights against being reduced to mere mimesis.”³⁵

It so happens that decades of critical assessment of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have gone a long way in proving the complex, multifaceted character of a play that is more than a naturalistic drawing-room comedy. At the very least, as Stephen Bottoms puts it, *Who's Afraid* fuses “domestic realism with the cyclical verbal interplay and mysterious uncertainties characteristic of the so-called ‘theatre of the absurd.’”³⁶ But, as hinted above, the Spanish 1966 *¿Quién teme a Virginia Woolf?*, directed by José Osuna³⁷ and translated by José Méndez Herrera,³⁸ did not heed such complexity and opted for a more straightforward rendition. Yet, it played to thrilled houses for nearly three months and then toured to Barcelona and other cities.

The road version was milder, with less violence and fewer insults. Still, everywhere the show played, its scandalous character was promptly remarked upon. As if word of mouth were not enough, the company got into the habit of inserting ads in local newspapers warning that the show was only for adults and should not be attended by spectators without a “sólida formación” [solid education]. Whether they were mindful of people's sensibilities or desirous to fuel scandal is open to debate. Méndez Herrera's “Antecrítica”³⁹ had already made it clear that the company was intent on exploiting the controversy as far

35 Ibid., 23.

36 Bottoms, “The Man Who Had Three Lives,” 1.

37 The main roles, hardly appropriate for beginners, were entrusted to seasoned actors Mary Carrillo and Enrique Diosdado. Upon Carrillo's death in 2009, an obituary in *El país* mentioned a story that is hard to believe. It was claimed that Albee attended the Spanish premiere of his play and was so absorbed by Carrillo's performance that he suggested her for the movie role of Martha. None of the papers available for consultation mention that Albee was present during opening night, which makes the claim doubtful. It would have been too noticeable an event for the press to ignore. Concerning Carrillo's excellence as an actress, Layton once remarked she was the Spanish actress who impressed him most when he first came to Spain. Cfr. Anonymous, “T.E.I.: Historia y método,” *Primer acto* 142 (March 1972): 12.

38 Méndez Herrera's version was never published, maybe to avoid copyright problems. As I suggested elsewhere, it may have been an unacknowledged adaptation of Marcelo de Ridder's Argentinian version. Cfr. Ramón Espejo, “*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: Edward Albee, en España, y su posterior influencia en el teatro de Alfonso Paso,” *REDEN: Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos* 15–16 (1998): 111–121.

39 Translators and, less often, directors would publish a brief presentation of every play about to premiere in major papers the day before opening night. Such *autocríticas* or *antecríticas* serve an advertising purpose for the most part. If scrutinized more closely, they help us understand what kind of a reading the play in question had been given, or what the drift of the production was to be.

as possible; the first sentence read, “Llega hoy a la escena española una obra que ha agitado y ha apasionado a los públicos del mundo.” [Spain welcomes a play which has stirred and moved audiences the world over], one which has been “el centro del interés polémico de varios lugares” [controversial elsewhere].⁴⁰

At best, the play was oversimplified by critics and described as the work of still one more American playwright denouncing what was wrong with his society, this time capitalism infiltrating the most sacrosanct recesses of society: universities. More characteristically, critics seized the chance to berate the way American playwrights seemed to revel in the most filthy and disgusting, seeing only an “engendro” [eyesore] plagued with “palabrotas y obscenidades” [four-letter words and obscenities]; in view of such content, it was surprising that “de vez en cuando se retire alguno de los personajes a vomitar al cuarto de baño, pudiéndolo hacer delante del público” [characters leave the stage to vomit, when it would have been easier to do so in front of the audience].⁴¹ In defending Albee against such accusations of unrelieved, uncalled for vulgarity, similarly simplistic arguments were deployed. Playwright Alfonso Paso (the most prolific and successful of the period)⁴² would write, “Los que se escandalizan por alguna palabra fuerte o alguna situación demasiado viva deben estar pensando continuamente en el fondo de la condena inexorable al más grande mal que padece nuestra sociedad: la incomunicación.” [Those who are shocked by some swearword or an excessively frank situation must think that lurking beneath lies an inexorable indictment of the greatest ill of our times:

40 José Méndez Herrera, “Antecrítica de ‘Quién teme a Virginia Woolf?,’” *Abc*, February 15, 1966, 85.

41 Nicolás González Ruíz, “¿Quién teme a Virginia Woolf?, estreno en el Goya,” *Ya*, February 16, 1966, 30.

42 Paso would write plays à la Albee, such as *Juguetes para un matrimonio* (1966); *Un matrimonio muy ... muy ... muy feliz* (1968); *El armario* (1969); and *La noche de la verdad* (1970). The latter’s protagonists are aptly named Marta and Jorge. On writing about *El armario*, Paso admitted he was inspired by Albee in the way characters “toman conciencia de su situación real y en una noche de locura abren las puertas a la verdad” [become aware of their reality, and in a crazy night open all doors to let the truth in]; he warns readers of the published edition that “en ‘El armario’ hay palabras, situaciones y escenas que escandalizarán a gran parte del público” [in *El armario* there are words, situations and scenes that will shock a great part of the audience]. Cf. Alfonso Paso, *El armario* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1969), 7–8. Paso was a great admirer of American drama, especially of its frankness and bluntness. In the Prologue to *Las que tienen que alternar*, Paso confessed to having included “alguna palabrota ... con la sana intención de imitar a los autores norteamericanos contemporáneos” [some swearword ... with the wholesome purpose of imitating contemporary American playwrights]. Cf. Alfonso Paso, *Las que tienen que alternar* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1968): 6.

alienation.]⁴³ Be that as it may, this time the success of the piece was due to what Albee himself called “only partly the right reasons,” referring to how audiences tend to see in his drama only a part of what he means or intends to convey.⁴⁴

It seems obvious that for both the company and the critics, Albee was a more contemporary Williams, O'Neill, or even Miller. Maybe they were clueless as to what else to do with him and seemingly confirmed in their views by the scandal surrounding productions of the play worldwide. A leftist commentator, José María de Quinto, wrote that in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee had sold out to Broadway, renouncing his earlier, bolder work in favor of a harmlessly shocking piece, served by a lamentable cast in Spain, acting out an even more lamentable and mutilated version.⁴⁵ Quinto at least pointed to “another” Albee although he failed to realize “he” was also present in this piece.

Before the decade was over, an attempt was made to broaden the Albee canon in Spain. The 1966 *A Delicate Balance* is, for Anne Paolucci, “the most deceptively conventional of Albee's plays to date.”⁴⁶ Adler referred to it as a “metaphysical drawing-room comedy,”⁴⁷ with echoes of T.S. Eliot, who also used the drawing-room comedy format to convey more existential concerns than usually found in such plays.⁴⁸ *A Delicate Balance* evokes O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in featuring a traumatized family in which everyone desperately tries to hurt everyone else. Unlike O'Neill's play, and rather more like a Buñuel film, the fear, a generalized dread from which Harry and Edna, allegedly best friends of the main couple, are fleeing, is planted in the midst of an already fractured household. Such fear, a symbol of vague contours but powerful and mysterious theatricality, is never explained away; rather than explain anything, much like the white whale in *Moby Dick*, the fear suggests the emptiness of the symbol, as well as its all-meaning, meaningless nature.

The play opened as *Un delicado equilibrio* at the Español theatre in Madrid in May 1969. Claudio Guerin Hill directed. It was sponsored by the Teatro Nacional de Cámara y Ensayo in an attempt by the government to co-opt alternative drama by offering mildly oppositional groups a venue to perform the plays. For the new Albee play, five performances were scheduled. But even this meager run was abruptly cut short. The booing and jeering on opening night

43 Paso, “¿Quién teme a la verdad?,” *Abc*, April 13, 1966, n/a.

44 Bottoms, “The Man Who Had Three Lives,” 5.

45 de Quinto, *Crítica teatral de los sesenta* (Murcia: University of Murcia, 1997): 48–52.

46 Paolucci, *From Tension*, 105.

47 Adler, *American Drama, 1940–1960: A Critical History* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 120.

48 Ana Antón-Pacheco, *El teatro de los Estados Unidos. Historia y crítica* (San Lorenzo de El Escorial: Langre, 2005): 101.

made it advisable to close it after only three performances. It might be complicated to gauge the reasons, but one is to suspect that the translation was greatly to blame. Antonio Gala was another Spanish playwright, by then starting out in the theatre. Often accused of verbosity and rhetorical excesses,⁴⁹ his style hardly seems compatible with the more straightforward and crisp Albee. In the absence of a published text that would allow us to step beyond speculation, we cannot more than venture to guess that Gala tried to re-write Albee's play rather than simply provide a Spanish translation, which may well have been the point from the beginning. Why was a playwright commissioned to produce a text if merely a translation was expected?

External evidence confirming this hypothesis is supplied by the reviews. David Ladra wrote that Gala was too much his own man, "demasiado peculiar como para adaptarse a un pensamiento, a unos conceptos que le son extraños por ser de otro" [too much himself to take a back seat to someone else's thoughts and notions] and literally spoke about him "fagocitando" [gobbling up] Albee.⁵⁰ José María Claver accused Albee's text of being too "pegajoso" [wordy], "estático" [static] and of "exasperante languidez y opacidad" [infuriating listlessness and dimness].⁵¹ Anyone even superficially familiar with Gala's work would find it easy to recognize his trademark style in such words. Ladra noted that Guerin Hill's direction was heavy-handed, trying to underline every single speech. This kind of direction may have been suited to a Gala play, in which characters never stop making pronouncements, but not to an Albee production. The unfortunate outcome of such a debacle was that the play was not performed again in Spain until it was re-staged in 2011, first in Catalan (at the Teatre Lliure) and then in Castilian (Madrid, Teatro Español), directed by Mario Gas. This last production falls outside the period under scrutiny, but it did not achieve much renown and soon closed.

In 1970, yet another Albee play was imported, one which was not to change significantly the way in which he was seen in Spain. Rather, *Everything in the*

49 Eduardo Pérez-Rasilla once referred to Gala's style as one in which "bajo su apariencia culta e inteligente ... esconde una cuidada fórmula comercial y reiterativa, en que la teatralidad deja paso a la verborrea y el conflicto se diluye en advertencias moralizantes, que no logran ahogar la brillantez del lenguaje ni ingenio mordaz de algunas de sus réplicas" [under a sophisticated, intelligent surface ... carefully contrived commercial purposes are hidden, trite and empty. Verbiage displaces theatricality and conflict becomes diluted in moral sermons. The language is however witty and acerbic, at least in some of the lines]. Cfr. Pérez-Rasilla, "La recepción del teatro desde los años cuarenta," in *Historia del teatro español. Volumen 2*, ed. Javier Huerta (Madrid: Gredos, 2003), 2921.

50 David Ladra, "Un delicado equilibrio, una comedia americana de Edward Albee," *Primer acto* 108 (May 1969): 64–65.

51 Claver, "La confusión de la ceremonia," *Ya*, May 16, 1969, 46.

Garden, Albee's 1967 adaptation of Giles Cooper's original, seemed to signal that the playwright was plunging ever further into naturalism, divested of any stylistic innovation that earlier work might have incorporated.⁵² Even though an audience seeking amusement and a certain controversy might find the experience worthwhile, and critics might find thematic worth to it, from a stylistic and aesthetic point of view *Everything in the Garden* was far removed from what Albee brought with him to the American theatre. The most generous judgment that can be passed is that it is a decidedly minor footnote in an otherwise artistically rewarding career, in spite of Albee's strenuous efforts to make Cooper's original slightly more theatrical, Brechtian, aggressive.

Conchita Montes learnt of the fact that Natividad Zaro had produced a Spanish translation to open in Buenos Aires, where it had triumphed.⁵³ She contacted the prestigious company headed by Gemma Cuervo and Fernando Guillén and pitched them the show, which they agreed to star in. The play opened at the Fígaro in Madrid in September 1970 as *Todo en el jardín*. The premiere was reported in every paper and magazine, attended as it was by celebrities from show business and television. Only in Madrid did the curtain open for a surprising 500 times, Albee's most successful play in Spain and one of the most successful ever to come from America (the British original was rarely mentioned and everyone assumed it was Albee's). It constituted one of the theatrical sensations of late Francoist Spain. The company could still find audiences as late as 1972 and obtained numerous awards.⁵⁴

It is rather puzzling how a play ignored in nearly every other country attained such success in Spain. Conscious that people were already tired of such a prudish establishment as Franco's, the company hit on just the right note,

52 For a brief overview of the play, go to the Edward Albee Society website: <http://edwardalbeesociety.org/works/everything-in-the-garden/>.

53 She was an actress, producer, translator, and director, whom we can find in *Mary, Mary* in the early 1960s and translating Arthur Kopit's *Oh, Dad, Poor Dad* for the TEI in the early 1970s.

54 Pilar Bardem (famous actor Javier Bardem's mother) was a member of the cast and expatiated at length on the show in her memoir. She writes about the provincial nature of a large part of the audience and about Gemma Cuervo's outstanding self-absorption, which took her to treat other members of the cast as little more than garbage. Cfr. Pilar Bardem, *La Bardem. Mis memorias* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 2005), 257–262. Guillén's take on the character explains the widespread acclaim and the prizes he obtained as well as critical opinions like those of Julio Trenas, who wrote that "[e]n la historia de las grandes interpretaciones teatrales quedará la que [Guillén] acaba de hacer del personaje de Albee" [Guillén's Richard will go down in the annals of great dramatic performances] (n/a). Cfr. Julio Trenas, "Fernando Guillén: Un gran actor en órbita," *Abc*, November 15, 1970, n/a. But the original character did not deserve such grandiosity, as he is no different than the other husbands, only newer to the business.

and peddled the piece on the question “¿EXISTE LA PROSTITUCIÓN EN LA MUJER CASADA?” [ARE SOME MARRIED WOMEN PROSTITUTES?], which seemed to them all that Albee’s play was really about. The prime newspaper *Abc* took the matter so seriously that it brought out a special story, trying to substantiate Albee’s findings. They interviewed sociologists, movie stars, celebrities, and they all concurred it was a sadly widespread phenomenon. Disturbingly, it did not only occur “en países relajados como Inglaterra o Estados Unidos, sino también en Irlanda y en Italia. Y en España” [in countries of relaxed morals like England and America, but also in Ireland and Italy. And in Spain].⁵⁵ Critic José María Claver even argued that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was maudlin and hackneyed, compared to such a masterpiece as *Everything in the Garden*.⁵⁶ It should be noted that a significant number of Spanish reviewers, writing for very conventional newspapers, tended to bestow exaggerated praise on rather mediocre plays (also harmless and politically “safe”), and shy away from, and amply berate, ones we now consider masterpieces (but potentially more subversive).

Knowing that critics would argue the subject matter was entirely removed from our reality, Conchita Montes explained in her “Antecrítica” that no country was free from the onset of materialism and consumerism. Spain was no exception although Albee was not trying to formulate a specific denunciation but had a larger goal in mind.⁵⁷ The latter qualification was rather useless, first because the company and the papers made sure that it was not seen that way, and secondly, because the acting and direction were wholly naturalistic. Although Albee introduced an engaged narrator to comment on the action and give it a more dialectical character in an effort to prompt reflection, the narrator was dispensed with in the Spanish production. His presence, it would seem, might have threatened the naturalistic reading, which the play was to be predicated upon.

Raymond H. Doyle explained that *Everything in the Garden* “forma una gigantesca metáfora, es decir, una especie de ‘auto sacramental moderno’ en el cual los personajes pierden su valor como individuos y se convierten en símbolos de tendencias peligrosas o negativas presentes en el mundo actual” [forms a gigantic metaphor; a sort of contemporary sacramental act, where characters lose their value as individuals, to stand for dangerous trends of the modern

55 Fernán González, “Polémica en torno a un tema terrible (la prostitución de la mujer casada), tratado en la obra teatral ‘Todo en el jardín,’ de Edward Albee,” *Abc*, January 13, 1971, n/a.

56 Claver, “Los esclavos del demonio,” *Ya*, September 12, 1970, 38.

57 Conchita Montes, “Antecrítica de ‘Todo en el jardín,’” *Abc*, September 10, 1970, 58.

world]; thus, Albee “acentúa y ... exagera lo más grotesco y negativo para dar más impacto a su finalidad didáctica” [distorts and magnifies ... the most grotesque and unseemly to drive home his lesson].⁵⁸ But one single review was not to counteract the kind of reading that was being configured from all sides with such strength and deliberation. José Monleón warned his readers that the original had deployed a certain stylistic ambiguity, which in Spain was tilted towards the naturalistic, a mode in which Spanish actors, directors, and audiences felt more comfortable.⁵⁹ Indeed, Lorenzo López Sancho had generally enjoyed the production, except for the few aspects which to him deviated from the overall searing realism, meaning he had noted that something was odd about his own consideration of the piece as deeply realistic but found it more convenient to wave it away.⁶⁰

Javier and Juan José Coy were two brothers, who had planted the seed of American Studies in Spain and taught courses and seminars on American literature at the University of Salamanca since the early 1960s. In 1967, they published *Teatro norteamericano actual* (Miller, Inge, Albee), the first Spanish book on American drama. Admittedly, entire sections are plot summaries of the different plays, and the book did little more than provide an overview of the three playwrights. However, at a time when there was so little available outside the hurried judgment of newspaper reviewers (and in a country where knowledge of English was almost an extravagance), such an endeavor was highly valuable. Unfortunately, the book did little to alert readers to the existence of dimensions to Albee's drama beyond naturalism, given the strong emphasis on the plots of the plays, and almost complete neglect of style and form. In 1976, the Coys brought out *La anarquía y el orden*. Although not specifically about American drama, it contained an extended, very insightful section on Albee, maybe less focused on the naturalism of the plays but not completely dismissing it either.

2 1971–1985

By the early 1970s, Albee seemed a distinguished, if more stylish, descendant of his forefathers in the American theatre. *A Delicate Balance* notwithstanding, given its rapid dismissal, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Everything in the*

58 Raymond H. Doyle, “Una especie de auto sacramental moderno,” *Abc*, March 19, 1971, n/a.

59 José Monleón, “Madrid: Apertura de la temporada,” *Primer acto* 125 (October 1970): 64–65.

60 Lorenzo López Sancho, “‘Todo en el jardín,’ de Edward Albee, en el Fígaro,” *Abc*, September 12, 1970, 61.

Garden looked like updated versions of anything Miller, Williams, or O'Neill might have written, at least in their Spanish renditions. In the early 1960s, the productions briefly referred to above of earlier Albee plays might have called such a view into question, but few theatre goers attended them and even fewer remembered them by the end of the decade. If Albee was the beacon of "new" American drama, as some journals insisted, he was surprisingly similar to his predecessors. In 1971, a translation of Richard E. Amacher's *Edward Albee*, published in Buenos Aires, was widely circulated in Spain. One of the most insightful and comprehensive books to date on the playwright, Amacher discussed major theories to explain Albee's drama. But not unlike previous research, when it came to specific works, Amacher did little more than sum up the plays. The extensive summaries may have been meant to prove Amacher's point that without a naturalistic backbone the plays did not make sense, but Amacher's reading clearly did not invite fresh approaches to Albee's dramatic production.

Also in the early 1970s, a new, more ambitious rendition of *The Zoo Story* by the Teatro Experimental Independiente, henceforth referred to by its popular acronym, TEI, directed by Layton, might have become a watershed event within Albee's Spanish history. Furthermore, two later versions of *Seascape* appeared to interrogate prevalent views of the playwright but largely failed in such an endeavor. The TEI was one of the most significant independent ensembles that came to define and symbolize the yearning for political and artistic freedom in Spanish theatre throughout late Francoism. Four of its productions of the early 1970s were based on American plays. Given how respected and admired their work was, it is hard to underestimate their contribution to the dissemination of so-called "new American drama". The group was already regarded in 1972 by Demetrio Enrique as "sin duda alguna, el más importante—teatralmente—de cuantos [grupos] en España están a la luz. El único que, en un local abierto continuamente al público, piensa que el teatro es un medio suficientemente importante para dedicarla la vida, y el espectador, un ser suficientemente humano como para tomarlo en serio" [undoubtedly the most important of all the theatrical ensembles in the country. They are the only company with their own venue and the only one to believe that theatre is relevant enough to devote oneself entirely to it, and that audiences deserve respect and need to be offered serious work].⁶¹

On the one hand, the TEI recognized that Albee was not a younger version of Williams or O'Neill but rather a highly original and innovative voice, hitherto misrepresented. Layton, who was by then a member of the TEI, while probably glad to see how popular *The Zoo Story* had become, may have felt that

61 Demetrio Enrique, "El T.E.I. ¿Reinar después de morir?," *Triunfo*, October 7, 1972, 39.

more professionalism would benefit the piece. He set out to direct one more production of *Historia del zoo*, which opened in November 1971 at the Pequeño Teatro Magallanes, which, together with other venues, had given rise to the equivalent of Off-Off Broadway in Madrid. This new *Historia del zoo* was not authorized for just a limited period but ran for as long as the TEI could draw interested audiences.

As the play has been widely scrutinized by other scholars, it is not necessary to engage in extensive analysis here. One just needs to note that it is Albee at his most characteristic, with a naturalism that never disappears completely but co-exists with various influences and, in the last resort, with Albee's idiosyncratic style, aesthetics, and philosophy. According to Robert B. Bennett, "Albee does not here presume the absurdist's certainty that all is meaningless nor the social protester's certainty that he knows what is wrong and how to correct it," capturing part of that liminal character we have claimed for the playwright throughout this essay.⁶² Mary C. Anderson, aware the play has been approached in allegorical, Christian, existentialist, absurdist terms, concludes that it "has managed to absorb these perspectives without exhausting its many levels of meaning."⁶³ For Kolin, the play "was a profound challenge to boundaries, traditions, and ideologies" in forcing a character who is a modern everyman to re-define "established modes of determining identity and evaluating perceptions."⁶⁴

Historia del zoo ran in Madrid for over six months, soon becoming the show everyone (within a given milieu, that is) *had* to see. Throughout 1972 and 1973, Albee's one-act was on offer in countless other venues elsewhere across Spain and occasionally back in Madrid. Yet, even if the play is an important milestone within Albee's career,⁶⁵ the unfathomable success of *Everything in the Garden* makes one ponder what exactly made *The Zoo Story* so popular among Spanish theatre-goers.

As a champion of Method acting, Layton did not hesitate to employ the technique throughout Albee's play.⁶⁶ To showcase its naturalism to the detriment

62 Bennett, "Tragic Vision in *The Zoo Story*," in *Essays on Modern American Drama*, ed. Dorothy Parker (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987), 110.

63 Anderson, "Ritual and Initiation in *The Zoo Story*," in *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983), 93.

64 Kolin, "Albee's Early One-Act Plays," 24.

65 Toby Zinman's contention that owing to its "redefinition of realism," *The Zoo Story* "would radically alter American theater in the second half of the twentieth century" (1) is perhaps an overstatement, however. Cfr. Zinman, *Edward Albee* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

66 Anonymous, "T.E.I.," 24.

of more absurdist aspects is obviously a choice, one that needs to be borne in mind in any approach to the role of Albee's play in Spain. The Spanish Peter and Jerry spoke and moved in ways that made their actions believable, and the actors were encouraged to dig into their psyches, to find motivations and then base their work on them. Actions or lines less easy to understand from a naturalistic point of view, like the well-known and oft-quoted declaration that "sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way to come back a short distance correctly,"⁶⁷ were either dropped or slightly modified.⁶⁸

In his prologue to the 1991 edition of his translation, Layton offered a simplified approach to the two characters. For him, Peter is merely a repressed middle-class executive and Jerry a rebellious misfit; both tend towards the stereotype.⁶⁹ The play is, in Layton's view, the chronicle of an encounter between the two and not a more poignant and far-reaching parable of modern society. Reading some notes taken from one of Layton's lessons in directing and acting in plays, one may understand why *The Zoo Story* proved so handy: ideal plays that provide basic Method training were those featuring two conflicting characters, one of them an outsider (the protagonist) who wants something the other (the antagonist) is not ready or eager to give him.⁷⁰ Both of them need both outspoken and hidden motivations as well as emotional bonds and an urgency to resolve the conflict. One wonders if Layton wrote these notes before directing *The Zoo Story* or if they were suggested to him by that experience. But the view of Albee's play distilled from such remarks is clearly reductionist.

Every single critic expatiated on the anguish communicated by the TEI's *Historia del zoo*, and the psychological depth of the two characters, leaving no doubt as to Layton's reading. Moisés Pérez Coterillo, for instance, explained that Albee had written "un estudio denso de los dos personajes, una investigación, camino del subconsciente y del psicoanálisis, para evidenciar sentimientos sobre los que cabalga un diálogo brutal entre dos personajes enfrentados" [a profound investigation into the characters, psychoanalyzing their subconscious, so as to dig up feelings on which a brutal dialogue between two opponents is

67 Albee, *The American Dream. The Zoo Story* (New York: Signet, 1961), 30.

68 For a detailed analysis of Layton's version see Espejo, "Historia del zoo de Edward Albee y el teatro independiente español," *Atlantis* 14, no. 2 (December 1997): 65–76. On pp. 69–71, the way in which Jerry's monologue was extensively manipulated is discussed. Layton clearly wanted characters to be perfectly understood, and did as much as he could to cut corners wherever he saw fit. Meanwhile, he added passages trying to make psychological motivation more explicit.

69 Albee, *Historia del zoo*, trans. Layton (Madrid: La Avispa, 1991), 4.

70 See Alonso de Santos, "El 'Metodo,'" 30.

based].⁷¹ Adolfo Prego noted that “nunca esta ‘Historia’ había sido representada con tan verdadero dramatismo ... Los dos personajes supieron desvelar las líneas maestras de sus ocultas biografías, y explicar así el drama que estalla entre dos hombres que no se conocían y que por pura casualidad coincidieron un día en un banco público del parque” [never before has the play been performed so emotionally.... The two characters revealed every secret aspect of their lives, furnishing the motivation for the conflict between two strangers who out of sheer chance bumped into one another by a bench in a public park].⁷²

Although this production by the TEI seemed destined to challenge persistent views of Albee's drama in Spain, such aims were never realized or were realized very marginally. On the contrary, the naturalism which had earlier been grafted onto Albee in Spain was resorted to once more, even if blended with some odd touch that tried to herald Albee as an *avant garde* playwright. Whether Layton was directing the Albee he honestly believed was the right one or, aware of the limitations of a very provincial theatrical culture, he had come to the conclusion that it was the only way in which the play could stand a chance on the Spanish stage is uncertain.

By 1975, Albee had already plunged headlong into all-out experimentation, after *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968) and *All Over* (1971). *Seascape* is not the most experimental of this new phase, which is perhaps why it garnered him a second Pulitzer Prize and made it to Spain, unlike the other plays just mentioned. A thorough discussion of its merit again falls outside our present scope. Critics are divided. Bigsby dismisses it wryly, finding little to say about a piece with two lizards “unaccountably ... emerged from the sea fluent in English and handily available for discussion of the human condition”⁷³ with a human couple. For others, Albee's play is deserving of in-depth academic inquiry.⁷⁴ In my own view, it could have constituted a cross-hybridization

71 Coterillo, “Historia del zoo, por el T.E.I.,” *Primer acto* 142 (March 1972): 35.

72 Adolfo Prego, “‘Historia del zoo,’ de Albee, en el Pequeño Teatro,” *Abc*, November 9, 1971, 71.

73 Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 317.

74 See Lucina P. Gabbard, “Albee's *Seascape*: An Adult Fairy Tale,” in *Essays on Modern American Drama*, ed. Dorothy Parker (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987), 151–158. For all of Zinman's dogged, but nonetheless insightful and inspiring, efforts to give the play credit, she has to admit that it “is, finally, disappointing in its lack of philosophical depth,” as, among other things, “the lizards' emergence from the depths of the sea ... does not satisfyingly deliver meaning. One tempting interpretation is that the action of the play is about the development of civilization: but since Leslie and Sarah are eminently civilized linguistically, ethically, and behaviorally, the idea that they are underdeveloped and unsocialized seems a false one.” Cf. Zinman, *Edward Albee*, m2qxzc, 83.

between styles and forms, but a clumsy execution causes it to come off as disconcerting, an embarrassing hodgepodge, sardonic at times, transcendental at others, trudging along unsteadily and somewhat self-consciously.

The production of what in Catalan was called *Bèsties de mar* was undertaken by A-71 in 1976. Before Albee, the group had done work on Ionesco or Manuel de Pedrolo, showing a fondness for the Theatre of the Absurd. Juan M. Gual and Ignasi Roda assumed the direction of a text translated by writer Terenci Moix. A-71 was an independent group, and they circulated their proposal among the usual venues committed to this kind of theatre, among them the Sala Cadarso in Madrid. They could not obtain a venue to offer the play on a regular basis, but admirers of Albee could enjoy the occasional chance of enlarging their knowledge of his work every time they could find a place to perform in for an evening or two.

Ensembles such as A-71 did not refrain from altering the originals as much as they saw fit. Thus, *Seascape* was given an idiosyncratic staging. As the translation was never published, the extent of the modifications cannot be fully ascertained, but, from comments by various reviewers, one learns that Nancy was played by a man in drag named Enriqueta. Her husband, Carles in the Catalan version, was costumed as an animal trainer, the set itself resembling a circus tent. The goal seemed to be to maximize the absurd to the almost complete neglect of the naturalistic style. Still, one reviewer saw “una dissecció naturalista d'un matrimoni americà madur” [a naturalistic dissection of a middle-aged American couple],⁷⁵ which makes no sense in view of how little the characters were fleshed-out but was probably a result of preconceptions of Albee the reviewer brought to bear on the show. Manuel Gómez Ortiz concluded the play was a “farsa esperpéntica” [grotesque farce],⁷⁶ an opinion shared by an anonymous reviewer for the Catalan paper *Avui*.⁷⁷ Both these critics and others found no fault with such an approach. Aware that Albee's purposes might have been less comedic, at least to a certain extent, it was a time when critics in Spain had already started to welcome daring proposals, indifferent as to how they happened to measure up to the originals.

A Madrid production opened years later, in December 1983, at the Sala Cadarso, bafflingly titled *¿Dónde estaba usted el día después?* [*Where Were You the Day After?*], an allusion to Nicholas Meyer's famous 1983 film. Directed by Alfredo Mañas, the play's sets were by Concha Montesinos Lorca and Gloria

75 Xavier Fàbregas, *Teatre en viu (1973–1976)* (Barcelona: Institut del Teatre/Edicions 62, 1990), 311.

76 Manuel Gómez Ortiz, “Albee, en un excelente montaje,” *Ya*, November 30, 1976, 43.

77 Fàbregas, *Teatre*, 86.

García Lorca, nieces of the famous playwright. The play was set in a world that had survived a nuclear catastrophe. Charlie and Nancy are among the survivors while the other couple consists of two mutants. Some critics noted that the controversy that Albee had cooked up this time consisted of his broaching such a thorny subject as nuclear war.⁷⁸ Apparently, there was no way to approach an Albee play without stumbling upon something with which the audience could be conveniently shocked.

Once again, the absence of a published text does not allow us to go far in assessing what the drift of the Spanish version truly was. Critics and audiences were unimpressed, and reviews tended to insist it was a boring show, erratic for the most part, a source of disappointment for Albee's admirers. The latter was probably caused by the fact that the scandal and crude realism of previous work was absent. Whether or not the company intended to give *Seascape* a naturalistic twist remains difficult to determine, but it seems clear that the endeavor fell through, in all likelihood due to the absence of a George and a Martha, or a Peter and a Jerry.

3 1986–2010

Within this final period of our quick survey, plays already known were given new productions, sometimes using new translations. Also, new offerings broadened the Albee canon in Spain although not necessarily in new directions. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* remained a very popular play, and time and again new productions graced Spanish stages, both in Catalan and in Spanish. Unfortunately, none of them deigned to challenge conventional views of the piece as a sophisticated drawing-room comedy, consecrated since the 1960s. Marcos Ordóñez blames it on the play's status as a classic, which has always caused our directors to approach it with reverential awe.⁷⁹ He may be right in making this claim. As we will soon see, some attempt was made to diverge from the kind of Albee offering discussed heretofore, but such endeavors were mostly thwarted by the kind of Albee that audiences had come to expect and the consequent pressure for companies and directors to pander to it. (Theatre is after all business.).

A 1986 production featured Enrique Ciurana and Luisa Fernanda Gaona as George and Martha. A Catalan staging in 1990 entrusted the main roles to Amparo Moreno, a very popular star, and Hermann Bonnín, and there was talk of a

⁷⁸ María Teresa San Andrés, "Psicosis nuclear," *Hoja del lunes*, December 5, 1983, 27.

⁷⁹ Marcos Ordóñez, *A pie de obra. Escritos sobre teatro* (Barcelona: Alba Editorial, 2003), 18.

bold stroke in casting both actors (in the marquee, Moreno's name overshadowed Albee's, the title of the play, or any of her fellow cast member's). In one of the most famous versions, in 1999, the lead roles were performed by Adolfo Marsillach and Nuria Espert, both among the most respected of Spanish actors.

Emerging from the above, one is to conclude that the play is deemed ideal for great stars. Attendant upon it is a lack of interest in the piece as dramatic exploration. Directors tend to treat it as a profitable character-driven play, try to secure great stars to act in it, and refrain from fiddling with it much. Luis María Ansón, discussing the 1999 production, dismissed the play promptly but expatiated on the performances of Espert and Marsillach.⁸⁰ According to Ferràn Corbella, "la obra depende directamente de un par de divos capaces de tirar adelante la fiesta de insultos y enfrentamiento" [the play calls for a couple of stars who can pull off a true feast of name-calling and aggression], referring right away to Albee's psychological probing as the sole goal, a "sublime ejercicio a lo Actor's Studio" [sublime Actors Studio-like exercise].⁸¹ Yet, Corbella and other critics mention a subdued, distanced, almost Brechtian performance by Marsillach, which they felt did not sit well with the text. It may have been an unsuccessful attempt to take the piece to new, apparently undesired and uncomfortable realms. But just as the critics were disappointed by it, there is good reason to surmise that the audience might have felt the same way. On the other hand, when critics mention a discrepancy, it may well be that the company did not want to depart entirely from the Albee who had become part of the Spanish theatrical canon and tried to combine that Albee with a less manageable and well-known one.

Credit is due to the fact that the 1990 version used garish colors, graffiti, aggressive lighting, a circus-like atmosphere, and a panoply of devices with which to challenge the naturalistic staging that had come to seem inevitable. Critics were prompt to notice that the expressionism of the sets⁸² was rather at odds with the naturalistic acting.⁸³ Whatever new direction the company was trying to take the play, their effort was thwarted by the inertia of previous productions. In the Prologue to the published version, Josep M. Carandell cheered how the "modèlica adaptació ... supprimeix sense compassió la majoria dels símbols que en alguns moments fan farragosa i reiterative l'obra fins

80 Ansón, "Marsillach," *Teatro completo*, by Adolfo Marsillach (Madrid: AAT, 2003), 8.

81 Corbella, "¿Quién teme a Virginia Woolf? El retorno de Adolfo Marsillach," *Reseña* 312 (January 2000): 32.

82 Manolo Trullàs, the set designer, explained that he had tried to recreate a sort of "comic perverso" [perverse comic book]. Cfr. Carolina Hernández, "Desafiando al lobo," *El público* 83 (March/April 1991): 64.

83 Corbella, "Qui te por de Virginia Woolf?, un Albee de salón," *Reseña* 214 (March 1991): 21.

a deixar-ne només el tronc i assoleix gairebé la força de la molt contundent ‘Història del zoo’” [model adaptation ... does without most of the symbols which make the play repetitive and wordy, leaving only the skeleton, thereby attaining the strength of the swift and overwhelming *The Zoo Story*].⁸⁴ Not only does this confirm the naturalistic interpretation of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* but also the widespread, decades-long one of *The Zoo Story*.

In 2003, Jaime Chávarri, responsible for a memorable rendition of *Three Tall Women* discussed below, reprised *Everything in the Garden* although this new reincarnation did not attain a fraction of the popularity and notoriety of its predecessor. Indubitably, the most produced Albee play in Spain remains *The Zoo Story*, with dozens of versions in every decade. Most of them, unlike *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, tend to have a local character and be offered outside professional circles, which makes it impossible to track them down since they go unreviewed altogether. Some theatrical group may have stepped beyond the canonized Layton version, but its run and reception must have been so limited as to effectively prevent other groups from learning of it, or following in their footsteps.

The exception to the above was a major production of *The Zoo Story* that opened in December 1991 at the María Guerrero in Madrid. Undertaken by the Centro Dramático Nacional, the Spanish equivalent to the Comédie Française in France or the Royal National Theatre in Britain, Layton directed the play once more. After years of public neglect of the theatre, democracy displayed a certain consciousness of the need for the government to fund and promote the arts. Among the initiatives, the Centro Dramático Nacional was created to stage twentieth-century classics from all over the world. At its helm was José Carlos Plaza, who played Peter with the TEI in 1971 and had been one of Layton’s most distinguished alumni and a prominent director in his own right. Chema Muñoz and José Pedro Carrión played Peter and Jerry, both Layton alumni and Method actors. It is hard not to see this production as indebted to the work of collectives such as the TEI and theatre practitioners such as Layton.

Layton’s take on the play surfaced once more in this new production. Among the changes was the book Peter was reading in the park when Jerry approached him: Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which features another businessman who finds out that his social status is more vulnerable than he had always believed. Psychologically, the new Peter was an insecure man from almost the beginning, and Jerry’s approaches were not fiercely repelled at first. A significant amount of text was added, causing the forty-five-minute show to last almost twice as long. While the re-thinking of Peter’s personality might

84 Albee, *Qui té por de la Virginia Woolf?*, trans. Jordi Arbonés (Barcelona: Institut del Teatre, 1991), 9.

have been a directorial decision, one suspects the extended duration was intended to fit the standard length of shows by the Centro Dramático Nacional and was a practical need, unrelated to artistic choices. Be that as it may, most likely the new lines served to anchor the play further in naturalism. A short run in Madrid and a fleeting tour of some Spanish cities seemed enough to pay homage to a text that had become a classic of Spanish amateur theatre and immensely popular among young actors for two decades; it was also a tribute to people like Layton, who managed, in a dire situation, to make the most of the few outlets that an authoritarian system allowed artists and young rebels.⁸⁵

Between 1991 and 2010, the play had fewer productions than before, but it remained a recurrent offering by Spanish groups, especially from Catalonia, the Basque Country, Asturias, and Galicia, often in the vernacular languages of such regions. In the case of Catalonia, however, the first Catalan production dates back to 1983. *Una història del zoo* was translated by Terenci Moix, a highly popular writer, whose text was never published. Sets deviated from the conventional austerity with which the one-act is usually staged. Still, as Maryse Badiou explained in his review, the approach was highly naturalistic but also flawed, with actors clumsily directed and audiences bored by a slow-paced show that never found a sense of direction.⁸⁶ As a corollary to our history of *The Zoo Story* in Spain, a comment on the occasion of the William Layton company's new staging of the piece in 2002 is well worth noting. After a performance in a theatre festival in Valencia, Nel Diago noted the festival had offered a choice of shows ranging from the highly innovative to the utterly conventional and included Albee's among the latter.⁸⁷ Years of insisting on a single, maybe not entirely fair, reading of the piece had made it look dated. But what is probably dated is a naturalistic rendering of a play that was never intended to be performed in such a style to begin with.

Jerónimo López Mozo, one of the more experimental Spanish playwrights of the late twentieth century, wrote in 1999 *La misma historia, poco después*, a postmodern sequel to *The Zoo Story*,⁸⁸ which López Mozo greatly admired.

85 Jerónimo López Mozo, "'Historia del zoo.' Plena vigencia," *Reseña* 225 (February 1992): 27.

86 Maryse Badiou, "Las dos Américas de Albee," *El público* 3 (December 1983): 19.

87 Nel Diago, "Un nuevo festival: València Escena Oberta," *Primer acto* 297 (January-March 2003): 150.

88 Albee's *At Home At the Zoo*, the prequel to the piece that now also includes what we have addressed throughout this chapter as *The Zoo Story*, has been largely neglected in Spain, at least so far, although some regional production has been documented, even as early as 2009. A largely unremarkable production of *The Play About the Baby* was briefly seen in 2006. It was said to keep the audience at a loss as to what exactly goes on onstage. Crumbling staircases and doors leading nowhere tried to capture Albee's sensibility through the set design. Cfr. Joseba Gorostiza, "Vértigo existencialista," *Artez* 113 (September 2006): 10–11.

In the play, Peter returns to the bench in Central Park three hours after Jerry's death. Questioned by a policeman, he has to re-enact what he went through, from his own perspective. For López Mozo, Albee's play was a mesmerizing dramatic jewel, which refused to stay confined within any well-known category.⁸⁹ In *La misma historia*, Peter, by means of symbolic gestures and actions, vindicates his right to tell the story from his own point of view and seems ready to go to any lengths to defend his claim.

Finally, I will examine two new Albee plays to arrive in Spain over the last two decades. The first is the 1994 *Three Tall Women*, whose Spanish premiere took place in October 1995 at the Lara theatre in Madrid, translated by Vicente Molina Foix, directed by Jaime Chávarri. Once again a play impossible to pigeonhole within a single, well-defined style or mood, it is, as I argued elsewhere, one of the most existentialist of Albee's dramas but hardly the only one.⁹⁰ But it is also among the most autobiographical. Passages of dialogue may remind us at times of Williams and O'Neill, as well as of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*, but also at times of Beckett, Genet, Pinter, and T.S. Eliot. Stylistically prismatic, the play deals with aging, sickness, lack of communication, and the need to incorporate a consciousness of the finite character of human life in order to lead a full, conscious life. Theatricalizing a splitting of selves, Albee enacts a Beckettian "pacto entre la experimentación y el naturalismo" [pact between experimentation and naturalism], which Marcos Ordóñez interestingly links with John Guare's Albee-like *Six Degrees of Separation*.⁹¹

Titled *Tres mujeres altas* in Spanish, it remains a milestone in Albee's stage history in Spain. Once again, the set design was marshaled in the service of defamiliarizing the audience and insisted on the constructedness of characters and situations. There is not a plot as such in the original, and this makes it easier for a staging to stray away from naturalism. What John Lahr called a "Cubist stage picture"⁹² is the enactment of one self split into three stage figures. Clad almost entirely in white, part of the set was somewhat figurative (although the pervasive whiteness calls such figurativeness into question), but part of it was left unfinished. The overall effect was dream-like, almost surrealist, for lack of a more accurate word to capture what makes Albee such a peculiar artist. In the hand program, Jaime Chávarri explained they had devised a set in which

89 John P. Gabriele, *Jerónimo López Mozo. Forma y contenido de un teatro español experimental* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2005), 173–174.

90 See Ramón Espejo, "Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* and its Existential Background," *Revista de estudios norteamericanos* 10 (2004): 83–94.

91 Ordóñez, *A pie*, 20.

92 Adler, "Albee's 31/2," 84.

“la memoria parece hacerse materia y perderse luego” [memory seems to materialize, only to disappear right afterwards].

Still, a few previous Albee productions, as noted above, had employed non-conventional sets that merely ended up clashing against plot-driven, largely psychological acting. This time, the three actresses were well instructed to refrain from rhetorical excesses and reminded (presumably by the director) that Albee was not describing a reality (or only partially so) and that there was much in the play that resisted easy and hackneyed categorization. Thus, the text was presented to the audience with delicacy, distance, and grace, respecting the inherent mystery that to Albee seems integral to the play’s meaning.

Reviews confirm the originality of the approach, as the complaint was often sounded that this was not the Albee people expected or recognized. Julio Martínez Velasco, much to his chagrin, regretted the protagonist was a woman “cuya vida no es ni lo escandalosa ni lo destructiva como lo fueron los entes de ficción que creó en su juventud. Parece un Albee decepcionante por descafeinado” [whose life is neither as scandalous or destructive as those Albee used to create when he was younger. It strikes me as a decaffeinated, disappointing Albee].⁹³ Such a view not only confirms the peculiar nature of the new production but also how widespread the view of Albee that we have been unpacking was. Other reviewers also missed the theatricality of previous work, the effectiveness of moving, searing, disturbing dialogues. Where were the explosions of feelings, the violence, with which Albee was associated? Alberto de la Hera blamed such absences on the director: “El enfrentamiento ... hubiera requerido instantes de odio, reproches ... El exceso de lujo, la dulcificación del diálogo, la creación de un ambiente grato han hecho que al director de escena se le escape en cierto modo el dramatismo trágico.” [The confrontation ... would have necessitated outbursts of hatred and old grudges ... Too much glamour, a dialogue a trifle too sweetened, a graceful environment caused the director to somewhat miss the tragic pathos.].⁹⁴

Approximately a decade after *Three Tall Women*, *The Goat*, or *Who Is Sylvia?* premiered in Spain, the last Albee play to join his Spanish canon, at least as far as professional companies are concerned. It opened in December 2005 at the Romea theatre in Barcelona, in a national production that was offered first across Catalonia in Catalan and later in the rest of Spain in a new, Castilian version titled *La cabra o ¿quién es Silvia?* The handout offered to the audience as they entered the theatre, with information on the play and the production,

93 Julio Martínez Velasco, “Tres mujeres altas, actrices a la cumbre,” *Abc de Sevilla*, January 26, 1996, 85.

94 de la Hera, “Un espectáculo serio,” *Ya*, October 9, 1995, 43.

did not bode well, as it seemed to disentangle itself from the “new” Albee that *Three Tall Women* had represented. Alberto de la Hera quoted the playwright (but not citing a specific source), saying he knew this play would expel him for good from American theatre, and insisting the only drama worth writing is that which defies and challenges the expectations of the viewer: “Cada uno de mis textos es un acto de agresión contra los *status quo*. Muchos dramaturgos exculpan a su público en lugar de darle un puñetazo en la cara, que es lo que habríamos de hacer.” [Each of my texts is an act of aggression against the status quo. Many playwrights absolve their audiences, instead of punching them in their face, which is what we all ought to do instead.] And while Albee may have been right in making these claims, one fears that such aggression might be all that the Spanish production would try to foreground.

The show was directed and translated by José María Pou. Pou is a shrewd director and producer and respected a actor, who has carved out a name for himself as an intelligent, sensitive artist, but also one with a keen eye for business. In the hand program, Pou supplemented the remarks above with a critical exegesis of the play, which, to him, blends the tragic and the comic, and broaches common themes in Albee’s drama, such as loneliness, alienation, and the crumbling of conventional institutions like family. To Pou’s mind, the play explores the confines of desire in mysterious, eerie, provocative, unexpected ways. He did not hesitate to pronounce *The Goat* “la mejor obra de teatro que ha caído en mis manos en los últimos años” [the best play I have laid my hands on in years].

The play toured Spain for almost two years, and its run in Madrid was quite outstanding: six solid months at the Bellas Artes. It was amply discussed and attained considerable notoriety in the print media, radio, and television. It won most of the major Spanish theatre prizes and received positive critical recognition. For a while it seemed as though we were once again in the late years of Francoism, when plays such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Everything in the Garden* became theatrical sensations.

Unfortunately, and, in spite of Pou’s insightful remarks, the result was disappointing. The huge success of this production seemed a standing warning that Albee’s theatrical sensibility might have been missed once again. Unfortunately, having attended the production myself only served to confirm it. The transitions between the comic and the (overly) dramatic were abrupt, unwarranted. Actors went from trite wisecracks that sought to make audiences laugh to moments of *bathos* that were hardly less hilarious. At times one had the feeling of having been transported to an old melodrama, and, if Pou had grasped Albee’s meaning, one is in serious doubt as to whether the rest of the cast had, or whether Pou had been successful in making them understand it. I saw the

play in Seville, and there was such a sustained farcical mood throughout that audiences roared with laughter when Stevie came onstage with the bleeding corpse of the goat, a poignant moment in the original New York production. Where Albee tries to prompt reflection, the fast-moving Spanish production did not seem to contemplate such a reaction on the part of the audience, treated either to mindless emotion or roaring laughter.

Other than that, the acting was naturalistic and histrionic, and so were the hideous sets, which tried to suggest glamour and sophistication but failed to do so as soon as one realized the paintings hanging from the wall clearly came from a dime store (or several, judging from a clash of styles that did not appear to be intentional). Pou started to play the protagonist in a more subdued key but was swept along by the over-the-top performances of each and every one of his fellow cast members. It remains to be decided whether the production, in spite of its box office success, was an artistic failure because the company did not know any better or because this new Albee play was exactly the one Spanish audiences were waiting for; the one, that is, prevalent readings of his drama had configured theretofore.

This essay has not traced a monochrome history of Albee's reception in Spain. To say that the complexity of his drama has been entirely unheeded would be unfair although, as has been shown, that complexity has been played down to a significant extent. Whether the blame is to be assigned to an establishment in which a general mediocrity has precluded more intelligent readings of Albee's plays, or to audiences unprepared for a dramaturgy that could not be pigeonholed easily, or to the fact that Albee has been unlucky with those in charge of passing his voice on to Spanish audiences, one is left to hope that the future may bring us both unfamiliar plays by Albee as well as new, daring approaches to familiar ones. Bottoms has written that in our "postmodern theatre culture" it is all too easy "to forget that the somewhat patrician figure of Edward Albee was himself once a controversial young iconoclast, and indeed that, throughout his long career, he has consistently refused to do what is expected of him—and has the sling and arrow scars to prove it."⁹⁵ If this is indeed indicative of a general tendency, it can be safely concluded that Spain did not take part in it. Albee has never been a rebellious figure in Spain because most of the widely-discussed productions of his work have failed to emphasize this aspect to the degree that would truly do him justice.

According to Julio César Santoyo, "por cada mil personas que han leído a Hemingway hay una que conoce la obra dramática de Albee" [out of a thousand people who have read Hemingway, only one is familiar with Albee's

95 Bottoms, "The Man Who Had Three Lives," 1.

drama].⁹⁶ Only two Albee plays have been published in Spain: *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* And one suspects that one of the ways to enrich Albee's canon and reach a more balanced and precise understanding of his drama is by reading his plays (thus also honoring his wishes, as stated above), either in English or any other language, and by promoting academic study and inquiry into his work, which has been scarce in Spanish academia. Maybe the two directions have to be traveled at once: the lack of texts does not promote much of a rapprochement to his work, and the lack of serious interest thereto does not favor a climate in which publishing houses might become interested in bringing out more translations of his plays.

96 Santoyo, *El delito de traducir* (León: University of León, 1995), 81.

Inside the Black Box: Albee's Visual Aesthetics of Obscurity

Valentine Vasak

Abstract

In his introduction to *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Edward Albee argues that he requires the audience of his plays to “be willing to experience a work on its own terms,” however obscure it may first appear. In both plays, Albee provides an unsettling visual experience: throughout *Box*, the stage remains bare except for a slightly distorted black cube; in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, only the outline of the cube remains. This unusual stage design constitutes a feature of visual innovation marking a distinct break with Albee's previous plays. This essay seeks to question the part stage design plays in this disquieting theatrical experience and to examine the intensely obscure and geometrical visual setup that Albee imagined to toy with his audience's spectatorial comfort zone. I wish to demonstrate that the stage structure of the black cube partakes in Albee's innovative theatrical experiment and that more than a stage frame and a container of theatrical events, the black cube becomes an artistic statement that shapes our reception of both plays.

Whether we read or watch Edward Albee's 1968 play *Box*, our initial encounter with the work bears the mark of obscurity. For the audience, who has come to experience firsthand the two embedded works *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the theatrical experience begins in darkness, according to the opening stage directions: “Curtain rises in darkness. Lights go up slowly to reveal the outline of a large cube.”¹ Similarly, the readers of Albee's plays also experience this liminal encounter with obscurity when they discover the playwright's words of introduction to *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* in the *Collected Plays* edition. Indeed, the playwright laments the fact that one of his plays, *Tiny Alice*, which opened a few years before *Box-Mao-Box*,²

1 Albee, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee*. 2, 1966–77 (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2008), 263. All quotations are taken from this version of the two plays. See Figure 1.

2 Since the premiere at the Studio Arena Theatre in Buffalo, NY in March 1968, when the plays were performed enmeshed as a double bill, *Box* and *Quotation from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* are usually referred to as *Box-Mao-Box*.

was deemed by critics “far too complicated and *obscure* for the audience to understand”³ (my emphasis). This reference to obscurity allows Albee to express his renewed intention to engage in a demanding artistic experimentation, one that conjures up darkness and requires an active participation of the audience. Asserting his opposition to stage entertainments that are unchallenging and easy to understand, the playwright establishes a connection between obscurity and innovation. Indeed, the audience needs to be fully engaged in and open to the performance, destabilizing as it may seem. According to the playwright, this attitude is mandatory, since “an audience has an *obligation* (to itself, to the art form in which it is participating, and even to the playwright) to be willing to experience a work on its own terms.”⁴ Needless to say, spectators and readers have sometimes found it challenging to engage with Albee’s aesthetic experimentations with opacity. To quote the first lines of Anthony Hopkins’ article “Conventional Albee: *Box and Chairman Mao*”:

There is little in Edward Albee’s play(s) *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* that obviously conforms to even an expressionistically liberal definition of ‘normal’ drama. Such things as plot, character, setting, dramatic conflict, dialogue hardly exist in any conventional sense.⁵

The disquieting quality of the work may be what led Chuck Gnys, one of the Playwright Unit’s managers, to deem *Box* “totally without point or interest, hopeless”⁶ and to reject it when Albee submitted it anonymously for consideration at the Unit, as David Crespy reminds us in his study *Off-off Broadway Explosion*. This essay seeks to question the part stage design plays in this disquieting theatrical experience and to examine the intensely obscure and geometrical visual setup that Albee imagined to toy with his audience’s spectatorial comfort zone. I wish to demonstrate that the stage structure of the black cube partakes in Albee’s innovative theatrical experiment. More than a stage frame and a container of theatrical events, the black cube becomes an artistic statement that shapes our reception of both plays. Besides, it is probably Albee’s most unsettling challenge to stage designers, and the liminal stage directions of both plays exemplify how Albee’s less representational vein challenges our interpretative reflexes. I wish to dwell on the relationship between *Box*’s unique stage design, this intriguing cubic element, and Albee’s theatrical endeavor,

³ Albee, Introduction to *Box*, 263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵ Hopkins, “Conventional Albee: *Box and Chairman Mao*,” *Modern Drama* 16, no. 2 (1973): 141.

⁶ Crespy, *Off-off Broadway Explosion: How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theater* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2003), 139.



FIGURE 1 Set designed by Guy Bezançon for the French performance of *Boîte-Mao-Boîte* at the Lucernaire Forum, directed by Laurent Terzieff. Reproduced with the authorization of Guy Bezançon.

especially given the avowed demanding nature of the work. How and why does the cubic structure visible onstage become the best medium to challenge our meaning-making drive? What is the theatrical function of this black box and how does the play shape the audience's encounter with obscurity?

1 Establishing Artistic Kinship

In the *Collected Plays* edition of the works of Edward Albee, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* rank among the few plays that are preceded by an individual introduction written by the playwright. These preliminary paragraphs describe both works as rich with “experiments”⁷ and seek to come to terms with the so-called obscurity of the plays: “I may as well right now insist that these two plays are quite simple. By that I mean that while technically they are fairly complex and they do demand from an audience quite close attention, their content can be apprehended without much difficulty.”⁸ Indeed, the introduction discloses the formally ambitious project behind the piece. Edward Albee describes the two functions of every work of art as follows:

A playwright—unless he is creating escapist romances (an honorable occupation of course)—has two obligations: first, to make some statement

⁷ Albee, Introduction to *Box*, 261.

⁸ Ibid.

about the condition of 'man' (as it is put) and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working. In both instances he must attempt change. In the first instance—since very few serious plays are written to glorify the status quo—the playwright must try to alter his society; in the second instance—since art must move, or wither—they playwright must try to alter the forms with which his precursors have had to work.⁹

In that respect, the introduction underlines the artistic ambition of the two embedded works: it is the playwright's duty to make a statement about theatre as an art form, even if this may unsettle the audience. The text almost reads like a manifesto: the author is acutely aware of inscribing his work within a history (hence the reference to precursors), and his self-proclaimed attempt at "altering the forms" to revive theatre denotes a formalist approach to his writing. Insofar as the plays are clearly identified as an artistic statement, the resort to the black cubic structure has to play a part in the larger esthetic project of the two embedded plays. Consequently, one may wonder whether the stage design of both plays can actually be considered visually innovative, as introducing a rupture in the history of theatre as an art form. How does this hollowed-out geometrical structure engage with the notion of artistic model and counter-model, and what artistic kinship does the structure outline and uncover?

First of all, the stylized structure present onstage has to be understood within the context of a century of theatrical innovation on both sides of the Atlantic. By breaking with the often representational settings of his first plays, Albee develops an approach to set design that is analogous to the visual experiments of the European avant-garde. Indeed, this stylized visual statement establishes a kinship of visual abstraction. In fact, Albee is far from being the only theatre artist who engages with abstraction and geometry in the 1960s. First, the playwright's choice of the cube as the central element of *Box* is reminiscent of Fernando Arrabal's work on cubes in *Les quatre cubes* (the four cubes, 1967).¹⁰ Similarly, Samuel Beckett's televisual experimentation with the figure of the square more than a decade later, in *Quad* (1984),¹¹ centers the theatrical experience on a confrontation with a geometrical figure. In both *Quad* and *Les quatre cubes*, the actors remain mute and the geometrical figure is the

9 Ibid., 260–261.

10 Arrabal, *Les quatre cubes* in *Théâtre. IV: Théâtre panique: L'architecte et l'empereur d'Assyrie*. (Paris: Christian Bourgois éditeur, 1967).

11 Beckett, *Quad*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 449–455.

governing principle of the theatrical experiment. In *Quad*, four hooded figures pace across the stage, following a very specific geometrical pattern consisting of counterclockwise rotations, diagonals, and straight lines. Their walk is carefully contained within a quadrangular shape that constitutes the stage space. Written for the flat screen of television, *Quad* invites the actors to organize their stage movements according to a two-dimensional diagram (included in the published edition). To that respect, it challenges our understanding of theatre as a three-dimensional embodied experience, since the play is in many ways an encounter with the plane (of the page and the screen). Yet, just like Albee's cubic structure, Beckett's quad defines a literal playground. Whereas in Beckett's play the quad contains and defines the movements of the performers, the monologue of *The Voice* in Albee's *Box* also suggests that the space created by the geometrical structure is designed to indicate motion as the Voice utters the following phrases: "Room to rock"¹² or "Room to move around."¹³ Interestingly, in Beckett's play, the voice of the playwright is not audible (there are no uttered cues) but prompts movement, whereas in Albee's play the Voice is heard but prompts an invisible movement. (In the first performance of *Box*, before the beginning of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the theatrical experience confronts the spectator with the perfectly still image of an empty set.)

Arrabal's *Les quatre cubes* also presents the geometrical structure as a source of physical movement. Unlike *Quad*'s two-dimensional instructions, the play engages fully with the multidimensional experience to which theatre submits our perception. The play is centered on the interactions between two mute actors and four cubes. Subtitled *une pure abstraction* (a pure abstraction), the play is bereft of traditional plot and develops a dramaturgy that solely consists of indications regarding the way actors and objects interact. The four cubes that give their title to the play are used as stage properties. (They are moved around and carried by actors) but also as elements of scenography (the actors step on them or even disappear inside them.) The four cubes enable a wide range of interactions, some of which question the polysemy of the verb "to play": character A & B are in turn throwing cubes around, jumping onto them, dancing on top of them, playing leapfrog or the flute. The dynamic succession of playful activities explores the meaning-making potential of a series of objects (the four cubes) that are re-contextualized in interaction with human bodies in order to conjure up new images: the spectators give free rein to their imagination and reinterpret the cubes as a projectile, a pedestal, a rock,

¹² Albee, *Box*, 263.

¹³ Ibid., 265.

a magician's box, etc. Thus, there is a certain kinship between Arrabal's cubes and Albee's onstage structure. By abstaining from attributing a final and delimited function to the cube, both dramatists allow these stage elements to act as a reservoir of images opening a limitless range of interpretative reconfigurations. The "pure abstraction" of Albee's non-functional cube¹⁴ allows the audience some "room to rock"¹⁵ and provides some interpretative leeway as to the meaning of the performance. Written eight years after Arrabal's play and more than a decade before Beckett's televisual experiment, Albee's cubic structure engages in an intertextual network of abstraction. The referential quality of the abstract signifier of the cube is both boundless (it can create echoes with the work of many artists and playwrights who have incorporated cubic elements to their esthetics) and yet remains distinctively alien to the representational codes of Broadway theatre of the 1960s. Consequently, even if Albee, Arrabal, and Beckett were not necessarily acquainted with their peers' experiments with geometric figures, they all developed a theatrical form structured by its unsettling abstract and minimalistic visual aesthetic. The scenic structure establishes a kinship of artistic abstraction and posits Albee as a playwright who is part of an ongoing redefinition of form that challenges the boundaries between theatrical movements, between countries, and between the arts.

Indeed, the onstage presence of the structure invites the spectator to think outside the theatrical box and build a bridge between theatre and other arts. First, the absence of actors onstage in *Box* and the pared-down stage could also be read as an attempt to shift the audience's focus from the visual field to the aural field, thus allowing the spectator to truly enjoy the musical quality of *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. A dedicated music-lover, who had a long and fruitful relationship with modernist composer William Flanagan, Albee often stressed in his writing the similarities between plays and music scores. In his study of Albee's work as a director, *Albee in Performance*, Rakesh Solomon reveals that during the rehearsal process of *Box-Mao-Box*, Albee would often close his eyes to better enjoy the rhythmic quality of the actors' interpretation. He also reports that Albee reproached Alan Schneider, who directed the premiere, for including too much stage action, thereby distracting the spectators from enjoying the aural quality of *Mao*: "Albee thought so much activity had disturbed his play's aural and visual rhythms."¹⁶ This dissociation

14 In *Box*, even if the offstage Voice utters the word "box" several times, the connection with stage structure is never explicitly made, neither is it clearly identified as a room, or a stage-frame.

15 Albee, *Box*, 263.

16 Solomon, *Albee In Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 105.

between rhythm and stage movement suggests a dynamic interaction between the set and the aural stimuli to which the audience is submitted. Moreover, the musical ambition at the heart of the plays is laid bare in the introduction: "I have attempted, in these two related plays, several experiments having to do—in the main—with the application of musical form to dramatic structure, and the use of *box* as a parenthesis around *Mao* is part of that experiment."¹⁷ As a consequence, the cubic onstage structure, stripped of the theatrical artifices of the well-made play, exposes Albee's ambition to reconnect the severed link among all art forms. This is first highly perceptible in the very structure of the play: the fact that the recurrence of *Box* after the performance of *Mao* is called a reprise is a first hint at this musical composition. The monologue of the offstage Voice also underlines this musical quality when she evokes "the tension and the tonic" (a phrase which gave its title to Anne Paolucci's seminal study of Albee's plays). This alliterative expression reveals the dramatist's utmost concern with the rhythmic quality of both plays, a rhythmic quality that transcends the boundary between the visual and the aural realm. One may also note the fact that the Voice clearly draws the audience's attention to the workmanship of the *Box* by assessing its sound-giving quality: "But this is solid, perfect joins ... good work. Knock and there is no give—no give of sound, I mean. A thud; no hollow."¹⁸ In this passage, the stage structure seems to be considered as a music instrument, which, even if it is not played, bridges the gap between aural and visual sensations. This connection is further underlined on the previous page through a parallel drawn between carpentry and music, which are both described as disciplines whose artistic quality is being questioned: "Carpentry is among the arts going out ... or crafts, if you're of a nonclassical disposition. There are others: other arts which have gone down to craft and which are going further ... walls, brick walls, music..."¹⁹ Albee's cheeky mention of the alternative between "arts" and "crafts" reveals his wish to engage in a debate regarding the very nature of art. If the monologue playfully feigns to question the artistic status (or absence thereof) of carpentry and music, one may of course be tempted to extend the scope of the question to theatre and to ponder how these two embedded plays take part in an ongoing definition of a genre poised between visual and aural sensations, between stillness and motion.

Moreover, in its visual abstraction, the stage cube is endowed with a citation-quality that expresses the playwright's ambition to explore the connections

¹⁷ Albee, Introduction to *Box*, 261.

¹⁸ Albee, *Box*, 264.

¹⁹ Ibid., 263.

and frictions between theatre and visual arts. Indeed, one may notice that the geometrical figure's ability to be both abstract and concrete, to point to nothing but itself but also to bear the mark of past artistic experiments, has made it a privileged field of experiment for many visual artists. Albee, who was a fond art collector and curated an exhibition entitled "From Idea to Matter" at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia and supported young visual artists through his foundation, was acutely aware of the innovations developed by contemporary sculptors.²⁰ Given his familiarity with the works of minimalists, it is very likely that Edward Albee was acquainted with the work of Tony Smith. Incidentally, one may wonder at the coincidence that the sculptor built his most famous work, *Die*—a cube—in 1968, the very year *Box-Mao-Box* premiered. On his website, Tony Smith describes his approach as follows:

This is a complicated piece. It has too many references to be coped with coherently. I undoubtedly decided to do it after having looked at Free Ride for a while. That was its real inception. Herodotus says, 'The most wonderful thing that was actually to be seen about this temple was a chapel in the enclosure made of a single stone, the length and height of which were the same, each wall being forty cubits square, and the whole a single block!' Recalling this several years ago, I designed a studio for myself in the form of a forty foot cube—eight feet to have been below grade. The interior of the studio I designed for Betty Parsons is a half cube. These are just specific references. The actual size of this steel box was determined by Leonardo's drawing. It is reproduced on the cover of a paperback, and it always seems to be in sight. Auden had written, "Let us honor if we can the vertical man, though we value none but the horizontal one." Six foot under. I didn't make a drawing; I just picked up the phone and ordered it.²¹

The artist's statement opens on the impossible task of taking stock of the myriad of referential echoes enabled by the bare physicality of the cube. In their pared down towering presence, Albee's and Smith's cubes display and hide several layers of referentiality; they are both deeply quotational (they remind of numerous past work) and completely unique. This citational quality also constitutes a key aspect of Albee's approach in *Box-Mao-Box*. Indeed, the very title of the embedded play, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, refers to

20 Albee was notably influenced by his friend, the American sculptor Louise Nevelson, to whom he dedicated his 2001 play *Occupant*.

21 <http://www.tonymsmithestate.com/artworks/sculpture/die-1962/8>, accessed July 12, 2018.

the act of borrowing someone else's words. The play is laden with verbatim excerpts of political speeches uttered by Mao and also includes the recitation of a poem (Will Carleton's *Over the Hill to the Poor House*). This incorporation of familiar texts led Anne Paolucci to liken the performance of the play to "a Platonic 'recognition,' an experience altogether new and yet—characteristically—curiously reminiscent of earlier works of Albee's as also of dramatic patterns of other ages."²² What Paolucci identifies dramatically could consequently be extended to our visual encounter with the cubic structure. Visually, the cube introduces something unmistakably familiar as well as radically new for the audience to gaze at. As a consequence, knowing as we do Albee's passionate commitment as an art collector, we can readily assume that this hollowed out cube could be a way to start a conversation with the experiments of contemporary visual artists. The cube can thus be seen as an onstage remanent image recalling the paradigm shifts of the twentieth century, an artistic tribute to a century of daring experiments in all art fields. Besides, this plasticity of the cube enables it to be at the same time a "pure abstraction" (just like Arrabal's play) and a reservoir of concrete interactions with the actors. For instance, in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the inside of the cube is reinterpreted as "the deck of an ocean liner":²³ the characters lean on the posts and the relative consistency of the visual setting provides the cubic structure with a representative quality that was not previously exploited in *Box*. The versatility of the visual structure allows a dynamic questioning of the limit between abstract and representational visual art akin to the approach developed by the artists who identified as cubists. In their 1912 Manifesto *Cubism*, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger define the cubist movement in terms that recall Albee's artistic ambition: cubism is described as a demanding artform that presents the spectator with a spatial rendition of a subjective outlook on the real:

Let the artist deepen his mission more than he broadens it. Let the forms which he discerns and the symbols in which he incorporates their qualities be sufficiently remote from the imagination of the crowd to prevent the truth which they convey from assuming a general character.²⁴

22 Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic: the Plays of Edward Albee* (Washington DC: The Bagehot Council, 2000), 123.

23 Albee, *Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung*, 271.

24 Gleizes and Metzinger, *Cubism*, reproduced in Herbert R.L. (dir.), *Modern Artists on Art: Second Enlarged Edition* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), 6.

The formal experiment therefore grants the spectator access to a visual perception that requires a rewarding effort. Spatiality prevails over verisimilitude and faithful rendition of proportions, but the artwork remains highly personal and abstraction avoids the pitfall of generalization. Similarly, Paolucci argues that “In *Box*, abstractions never become personifications or generalizations, but retain from beginning to end distinct shape and form, personality, particulars which define the substance of individuality.”²⁵ In Albee’s plays and in cubist painting, the sense of intimacy and idiosyncratic expression of an artist’s individual sensitivity is mediated by a demanding visual form. Once the onlooker has yielded to the ambitious inner formal logic of the work and appreciates it “on its own terms,”²⁶ the encounter with a highly personal work may occur.

The cubic structure therefore appears as resolutely innovative in the way it experiments with form and representation. Demanding and unsettling, it bridges the gap between different art forms and revives the ongoing debate on total art. Given the quotational quality of the play, one may argue that the cubic structure is very consciously inscribed within art history and creates a network of echoes with other masterpieces from different disciplines. Not only is the playwright heir to Beckett or O’Neill, but he is also a twentieth century artist who never shies away from the daring innovations of his time. His awareness of the developments in visual arts and music redefines the complex network of Albee’s artistic kinships and endows the cubic structure presented onstage with multilayered meaning.

2 The Black Box as Concept

2.1 *An Ideal Object*

Within this complex meaning-making process, the stage structure emerges not only as actual physical presence but also as concept. In fact, insofar as Albee—who did not work as a stage designer on these plays—never built it, the existence of the stage cube is enabled and conditioned by the fact of writing the initial stage direction, that is to say, of conceiving the structure as a mental object. Similarly, in his artistic statement for *Die* quoted earlier, Tony Smith highlights the fact that he never drew the piece for which he is credited as author. (“I didn’t make a drawing; I just picked up the phone and ordered it.”) Therefore, his authorship does not correspond to the act of making but rather lies in the mental construction that preceded the phone call to the workshop

²⁵ Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic*, 127.

²⁶ Albee, Introduction to *Box*, 261.

in which the actual object was made. Just like Smith's designing process, Albee's stage directions are a mental preconstruction, a set of instructions and directions that commands the building of an actual, physical object. In a 2004 article entitled "Why Read Plays?" Albee advocates reading as a privileged mode of access to his works:

Why, then, should it be assumed that a play text presents problems far more difficult for the reader? Beyond the peculiar typesetting particular to a play, the procedures are the same; the acrobatics the mind performs are identical; the results need be no different.²⁷

Therefore, even before the shared moment of the performance, plays are a mental experience, likened to "acrobatics of the mind." Already in a 1965 article, the dramatist suggested that a play has an existence of its own, whether it is read/seen or not: "When will we return the theater to the audience? Well, I don't think we should, frankly. Does the tree that falls in the forest, nobody hearing it, make any sound? I've always thought it did."²⁸ The reference to the tree falling in the forest is an allusion to a thought experiment often attributed to Irish philosopher George Berkeley. This conception of the play as a thought experiment, a purely intellectual construction, a whole object fully formed in the mind of the author before being laid down on paper and embodied on-stage, may lead us to construe the cube as an ideal mental projection, a concept, that exists in the mental space of the play even before being actualized by stage design.

Significantly, in *Box*, the monologue of the Voice also presents beauty and art as elements that extend beyond our reach:

When the beauty of it reminds us of loss. Instead of the attainable. When it tells us what we cannot have ... well, then ... it no longer relates ... does it. That is the thing about music. That is why we cannot listen anymore. (Pause) Because we cry.²⁹

Art is here depicted as a painful experience because it confronts us with the unattainable, that with which we cannot relate. The artwork therefore becomes an encounter with an ideal that we fail to grasp fully. In a way, the stage

²⁷ Albee, "Why Read Plays?," in *Stretching My Mind* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 257.

²⁸ Albee, "Ad Libs on Theater," in *Stretching My Mind*, 32.

²⁹ Albee, *Box*, 266.

structure evoked in the liminal stage direction contributes to this complex interplay between the actuality of the performance and the ideality of the written play. As described on the page in the dramatist's words, it is a purely mental object that cannot be fully captured and circumscribed; as presented on the stage by the individual interpretation of a stage designer, it is an actual concrete object that can be seized and perceived by an audience.

In that respect, the choice of a geometric object—a cube—to convey this tension between the aspiration to an artistic ideal and its fatally imperfect actualization discloses the intensely paradoxical nature of Albee's ambitious artistic project. Geometrical figures, just like written, not-yet-staged plays, are ideal objects that do not exist in our imperfect world, yet, just like plays, the very reason for their existence as intellectual objects is their potential actualization in physical objects or performances. As Michel Serres argues in his work *Geometry*, "We don't know if an intersection between the objective and the subjective exists, but if it does exist, full or empty, it is filled with those absent objects called mathematical idealities."³⁰ Unlike the geometric objects evoked by Serres, Albee's cubic structure, conceived in the mind of a literary author, bears the mark of subjectivity. Yet, it also confronts an ideal mental object (Albee's imagined cube) to its staged actualization (the cubic structure observed by those who watched the plays). It follows that, like the mathematical objects described by Serres, the black box of the cube resists definition and challenges our mental categories, so that we are sometimes led to refer it to "an ideal heaven at the extremes of the real or to a transcendental knowledge, the innermost of the innermost, that is to say, to the limits of the two utopic spaces, the double body of a sterile unicorn."³¹ Albee's cubic structure as it appears on stage thus becomes the meeting point where ideal spaces converge. The cube that the audience beholds is therefore located at the intersection between the virtual space of the ideal performance and the actual space of the auditorium. Both an abstraction and a concrete stage element, it exposes the multiplicity of vantage points that give way to the theatrical moment.

2.2 *Thinking Inside and Outside the Box: The Cube as a Figure of Mental Containment*

As a screen for mental projections, as the meeting point of virtuality and actuality, the cubic structure has often struck critics and commentators as being rich with symbolical meanings. Indeed, according to several Albee scholars, an

30 Serres, *Geometry: The Third Book of Foundations*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 207.

31 Ibid.

allegorical reading of the cube should be privileged, as it seems clear that the box should be deciphered and stands for more than itself. For instance, Anthony Hopkins sees the cube (and the fact that it is labeled a "box") as a device used to introduce a sense of continuity with the symbolic power of several of Albee's other plays. To back his claim, Hopkins draws on the metaphorical quality of the cubic outline, one of the many "pressurized containers of explosive hatred, duplicity, self-deceit and fear."³² (The sandbox of the eponymous play would be another one, as would be the stifling living rooms of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*.) Consequently, according to Hopkins, even *Box*'s stage structure is one of the many avatars of a sense of containment and entrapment that is central to many of Albee's plays. Similarly, in a passage on *Tiny Alice*, Stephen Bottoms sees the image of the mental box as a defining feature of Albee's esthetic:

Albee invites his audiences, too, to question their own concept of what is real—and perhaps, to "think outside the box"; outside the containing frame they may have created for their own life-performances. Visually and metaphorically, Albee's plays are full of frames, boxes, confining rooms—coffins.³³

The recurring image of the box as a device of entrapment contributes to sketching the image of the stage space as a mindscape. Like the replica of the castle in *Tiny Alice* or the sandbox in the eponymous play, the containers facing the audience evoke the individual's abilities to go beyond their own cerebral confines or their fatal inability to transcend their own psychological limitations. In *Box*, the disembodied presence of the offstage Voice reinforces the feeling of being faced with a stage rendition of a mental space. Given the haunting quality of the non sequitur monologue, the audience may very well interpret the play as the theatricalization of a stream of consciousness-like device. Besides, the lack of interaction and monologues in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* also establishes the stage as an introspective location, a space of visualization of what happens inside the different characters' minds. The obsessive continuity and consistency of each character's monologic cues (Chairman Mao's political discourse, the Long-Winded Lady's life story, and the Old Woman's recitation of the poem) and the lack of interaction between them reinforces this feeling of being trapped inside one—or several—minds: communication

³² Hopkins, "Conventional Albee," 142.

³³ Stephen J. Bottoms, Introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, ed. Bottoms, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

largely seems to be excluded from the world of both plays. Notably, when the Long-Winded Lady evokes the death of her husband and the subsequent evolution of her relationship to her daughter, the image of the box recurs:

And what for my daughter—*mine*, now, you'll notice; no longer ours; what box have I got for her? Oh ... the ephemera: jewelry, clothes, chairs ... and the money: enough. Nothing solid, except my dying, my death, those two, and the thought of her own.³⁴

The image of the actual boxes (jewelry box, safe in the bank) soon dissolve to give way to a mindscape of death and mourning. The box of transmission that the Long-Winded Lady's daughter will inherit is located at the crossroads of material possessions and mental representations. Threatening her daughter's innocence, this Pandora's Box is filled with gold and riches but also with a memento mori, the realization of the ephemeral nature of existence. In both plays, suffering and dying represent a significant part of this mindscape. As Bottoms notes, these mental containers are often coffins, and the limitations materialized by the edges of the cube also point to the finitude of life.

Moreover, the lament of the Long-Winded Lady tellingly shifts from a reference to the wealth of the characters (she seems to be able to pass on luxury objects as well as what is referred to as "enough" money to her daughter) to a mention of death. With this shift, the dramatist disqualifies earthly possessions that, in the end, do not seem to amount to much. One may perceive a hint of social critique in this passage: the Long-Winded Lady is yet another of Albee's affluent yet frustrated characters. Therefore, the image of mental containment conjured up by the image of the cube could also refer to the ideological boundaries that limit the mental scope of Albee's characters. Whereas *The American Dream* discloses a skeptical stance towards the national myths of success and self-realization, *Box-Mao-Box* places on the stage an almost mechanical and pantomimic Chairman Mao. Whereas *The American Dream* presents the spectators with an intimate image of containment as Grandma keeps the memories of her life in cardboard boxes, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* introduces the reader with what could be termed ideological containment. The verbatim quotations and the resort to the device of the Mask redoubling Mao's face (at least in the production directed by Albee himself, as Solomon notes) deprive the communist leader of any individual feature or intimacy and create a quasi-Brechtian device that enhances the artificiality of the set-up: the

34 Albee, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, 288.

Chinese leader fuses with his speech, and despite the theatrical embodiment, he fails to become anything other than his written, published words.

The character's lack of individual substance and the playwright's choice to put onstage such a controversial historical figure may be a way to present ideology as another of Albee's mental boxes. Written in the late 1960s, in the heat of the Space Race and at the height of the Cold War, the play issues a warning against the prepackaged boxes of ideological thinking. Critical of the capitalist logic of the affluent late 1960s society, Albee selects passages from Mao's writing that may question the American model but never presents any hint of sympathy to the largely dehumanized Chinese political leader. Performance historian Bruce McConachie defines containment as the governing cognitive metaphor that left its imprint on Cold War American Theatre. According to him, the clear-cut distinction between an inside, and an outside exerting some sort of pressure and friction over the former, became a key tenet of American cultural life in the 1950's. He notably resorts to the image of the "Chinese boxes" to account for the prominence of the logic of containment during the era:

For many Americans, the innocent self, the bunkered family, and the Chosen People provided a series of transitive Chinese boxes within which American morality could be protected and vindicated as a model for the "Free World." [...] In short, containment was at the hub of a vast network of cold war conceptions that structured much of the dominant culture of the era.³⁵

McConachie's study signals Albee's *The American Dream* as a play contesting what he terms the logic of "containment liberalism." One could argue that the same contestation is at stake in *Box-Mao-Box*: the onstage presence of the cube could be construed as a warning regarding the limiting, constraining force exerted on the individual by dominant cultural ideology. The box lays bare the conceptual arbitrariness of both liberalism and Maoism and physically and literally places the audience outside the box.

2.3 *The Box as Cosmos*

Both on a psychological and political level, the physical presence of the cubic structure could be interpreted as an invitation to outline a mental system: the actual wooden construction could be construed as a physical reminder of a conceptual edifice. This container may stand for a cerebral stage or echo

35 Bruce A. McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing & Contesting Containment, 1947–1962* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 12.

a political system. However, given that the actors in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* only appear and move within the limits of the stage space defined by the cubic structure, one can wonder whether the structure is not meant to suggest a self-contained world, a microcosm. By creating a frame, the set isolates a portion of reality and contributes to defining the theatrical world or universe of the play as a contained, cut-out version of our whole world. This is reminiscent of the work of French philosopher Étienne Souriau, who, in his 1951 article, "The Cube and the Sphere,"³⁶ distinguished between the Apollonian self-contained conception of the theatre as a cube and the Dionysian vision of performance as a sphere. Unlike the sphere—which constitutes the favored form of the open-air theatre, with no halls and no limits—the stage cube contains and constrains a small microcosm. "This little piece of universe is internally organized, and the physical aspects of this organization are imposed from start to finish on everything that happens within the box."³⁷ The use of sound effects such as seagulls or ship horns in *Box* evokes a large unlimited space: it seems that one can fit a whole ocean inside the black box.

Similarly, in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the four very different characters (an affluent woman, a poor woman, a Chinese leader, and a minister) seem to evoke—relatively—diversity, as if they were supposed to be a kind of sample of humanity at large. To a certain extent, the ambition of the play seems to be to conjure up a whole world onstage. This interplay between the microcosm of the scenic structure and the macrocosm of the world is also highlighted by Anne Paolucci:

[T]he transparent symbolism of the Box as the world or universe is of the same kind as that of the replica in *Tiny Alice*—both suggest the larger anagogical dimension outside of time—but the Box actually becomes transparent in the course of the play, easing us back gradually into allegorical time (the deck of a moving ocean liner suggesting the familiar cliché of the journey through life) and dissolving the here and now, at the end, with the reappearance of the Box and—paradoxically—the contrapuntal enriching of the dialogue with the reintroduction of Voice.³⁸

Paolucci reasserts the symbolical and allegorical power of the cube, which is once again defined by its ability to point outside of itself, since its self-contained

36 Souriau, "The Cube and the Sphere," *Educational Theatre Journal* 4, no. 1 (Mar., 1952): 11–18.

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic*, 125–126.

structure makes it a perfect medium to make statements about the universe as a whole. The conceptual plasticity of such a basic geometrical structure enables variations on scale (it can be seen as a mindscape, a political container, or a microcosm) and also questions our relationship to time: the time of the performance loses its grip on reality and makes the audience delve into allegorical time. This symbolical versatility and the adaptability of the structure (the sides of the box are removed between *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*) make it a quintessentially theatrical structure, one best fitted to reveal and conceal and to launch a meta-theatrical reflection on the nature of performance.

3 Showing and Hiding

Indeed, the cubic frame present onstage also allows Albee to make a statement about the very nature of theatre as an art form. In this final point, I explore how the scenic design of *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* creates a quintessential theatrical frame, rich with meta-theatrical evocativeness. I argue that beyond the sense of artistic kinship that the cube establishes and the conceptual value of the set, the geometrical design questions the traditional conception of the theatre space as a black box. I will first examine the dimming and transitional effects that define and inform the performance. Then, I will focus on the disclosing process that marks the unfolding of the performance as the set evolves from *Box* to *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. Finally, I will explore the transformative power of obscurity, which just like a scientific black box allows for dark and secret metamorphoses.

3.1 *Transitional Darkness*

First, one may pay attention to the numerous lighting effects that mark the aesthetic of the play. Indeed, from the onset of the performance, the theatrical innovation lies in Albee's resort to darkness. Onstage, the lights are often dimmed, and obscurity thus becomes a main tenet of the play and of the theatrical ritual at large. The opening stage direction of *Box* abounds in references to lighting effects and directs how the work of the light designer may interact with the sparsely furnished stage:

Curtain rises in darkness. Lights go up slowly to reveal the outline of a large cube. The cube should take up almost all of a small stage opening. The side facing the audience is open, but we should see the other five sides clearly, therefore the interior of the cube should be distorted,

smaller at the backstage side, for example; also, none of the sides should be exactly square in shape, but the angles of distortion should not be very great—not so great as to call attention to themselves and destroy the feeling of a cube. When the lights are fully up on the cube—quite bright light which stays constant until the final dim-out—there should be five seconds' silence.³⁹

This opening stage direction is marked by the presence of darkness, which is here meant to frame the theatrical experience. Indeed, the “curtain rises in darkness,” and the directions end with “the final dim-out.” This obscurity mimics the lack of interpretative landmarks that has proven so confusing for many theatre-goers. Thus, the interaction between the scenic structure and the lighting effects becomes part and parcel of the performance. In her fascinating study of the role of the color black and of darkness in the theatre, entitled *Noir, lumière et théâtralité*, (which could be translated as *Darkness, Light and Theatricality*) French lighting designer Véronique Perruchon highlights the transitional quality of darkness in the playhouse. Effectively, now that curtains are hardly in use anymore, the dimming out of the lights until the audience is in complete darkness has become the threshold between our daily lives and our status as participants in a shared artistic experience. Darkness thus becomes the punctuation, the brackets, or the parentheses that frame the theatrical experience. She also describes the scenic experiments of the end of the twentieth century as “the reign of the black box,” that is to say a moment in the history of theatre when the framing structure of the four walls has been laid bare and used for artistic purposes. According to Perruchon, “blackness thus becomes a unifying landmark that initiates a new somewhat sanctified ritual”⁴⁰ (my translation). The onstage presence of the cube outline in Albee’s box and later in *Mao*, redoubles the framing, enclosing function of the dimming out of the light.

By redoubling the stage frame (the actual room of the playhouse, and the cube which is part of the stage design), Albee simultaneously places us inside and outside the box. According to Souriau, this ubiquity of the spectator constitutes a defining feature of the theatrical experience. The presence onstage of a literal and actual box leads the audience to position themselves, both literally and metaphorically. In that respect, Souriau underlines the ambiguous position of the theatre audience:

39 Albee, *Box*, 263.

40 Perruchon, *Noir, lumière et théâtralité* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2016), 214.

The reason is that the same is true of art, after all, as of reality: we know very well that man is at once in the world, and looking out on the world. In all art and reality, there is a kind of external presence, in front of us, indispensable to us; and also a kind of internal presence that is equally useful and perhaps fills a greater void in our existence.⁴¹

Therefore, Albee's spectator is invited both to be captivated by what is happening inside the Box (in *Mao*) as well as to take a step back and reflect upon the meta-theatrical quality of the play, an aspect that he stressed in his staging by asking the actor who played Mao with a mask to hold an identical mask attached to a stick. As Solomon notes, Albee thought of it as "a joke about a box-within-in-a-box and Chinese duplicity."⁴² This *mise en abyme* or Chinese boxes quality of *Box-Mao-Box* is of course echoed by the enmeshed structure of both plays and the reprise of *Box* after the monologues comprising *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. The visual evocativeness of the black box therefore both signals the boundaries of the ritualized shared experience of theatre (through obscurity and lighting effects) and revels in its own theatricality through the many meta-theatrical devices and the redoubling of the stage frame.

3.2 *Staging a Revelation?*

This meta-theatrical hide and seek game uses the stage set-up to explore the interpretative richness of chiaroscuro. Yet, when both plays are performed together, the intermission and the change to the set of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* enable a reassessment of the role of obscurity as the disclosing of the new set launches new meta-theatrical questions. After a potential intermission, the audience expects to gaze at the set to witness something new. Indeed, theatre as a genre has always been connected to a disclosure of some kind and even after the device of the opening of the curtain fell out of fashion in theatres all over the world, theatre as an artform has always entailed elements of revelation. Whether it is when we enter the performance space, when the stage lights are lit, or when some stage element is removed to reveal another one, our enjoyment as spectators is more often than not connected to the act of being shown something that remained previously hidden.

This stripping down of a metaphorical veil often plays a key part in the theatrical process. When performed as a double-bill, *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, the fluid transition between both plays is marked by

41 Souriau, "The Cube and the Sphere," 13.

42 Solomon, *Albee In Performance*, 103.

a slight modulation of the set. The opening stage directions of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* indicate the changes to the set that have been made during the intermission and these new elements necessarily shape our perception of the play: "The outline of the cube remains; the set for *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* appears within the outlines of the cube during the brief blackout."⁴³ Therefore, the sides of the cube that the audience could gaze at during the first one-act play have been removed during the intermission. The blackout emphasizes the contrastive opposition between the plays as it conceals the transformation better to enhance its effect. Symbolically, the cube has been stripped down to its most basic form: it is now only an outlined structure made of posts connected together. The skeletal structure thereby revealed reverses the visual landmarks of the audience, providing one more element of destabilization for the spectator: the empty cube with full sides has been replaced by a cube full of people and stage elements but reduced to an outline.

In fact, it seems that the audience is given an opportunity to see through the previously opaque structure of the cube. Whereas *Box* enabled the audience to look inside the box, *Mao* completes the process of replacing opacity with transparency. This disclosing movement mirrors visually the almost anatomical desire of the playwright to peer into the dark recesses of the human soul. The set design stripped down of the panels of the cube has been submitted to one of the agonizing experiences of vivisection-like the scrutiny evoked in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*:

GEORGE: We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs (An aside to NICK) them which is still sloshable—(Back to HONEY) and get down to bone...you know what you do then?

HONEY: (Terribly interested) No!

GEORGE: When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone ... the marrow ... and that's what you gotta get at.⁴⁴

By removing a component in the set-up of the stage, the playwright creates a visual echo of the introspective movement that often characterizes his writing. Etymologically, introspection is connected to the act of peering inside, which is exactly what takes place here. Once the panels have been removed,

43 Albee, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, 268.

44 Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee, 1958–65* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), 292.

the spectator gazes at the entrails of the set. Anne Paolucci notes the “skeletal fashion”⁴⁵ in which both plays explore allegory and symbolism, and this stripping movement is at the heart of the performance experience. The second play, embedded into *Box*, could consequently be construed as pursuing the movement of “peeling the labels” of theatre initiated in *Box*. Nonetheless, it goes without saying that this movement of revelation does not completely foreclose the potential for hermeneutic obscurity of the play. Of course, this general movement of revelation casts light on some specific and fragmentary element of the play. In both plays, the motif of darkness remains utterly present and shapes our encounter with Edward Albee's work.

3.3 *The Transformative Power of Obscurity*

Finally, one must bear in mind that the very conception of stage design is pervaded with the idea of illusion. Darkness and visual effects initiate a new relationship to what is happening onstage. Even in the stage directions, obscurity is rich with a potential for transformation, and the set is clearly described as aiming for optical illusion: the structure is not a perfect cube but the angles of distortion should “not be very great—not so great as to call attention to themselves and destroy the feeling of a cube.”⁴⁶ The set thereby exposes the paradox of performance: one should strive to make an impression that reminds the spectator of a familiar structure (it is supposed to create the feeling of a cube), yet it is specified that the towering element present onstage is not a cube. In the three-dimensional world of the stage, where constructing a geometrically exact cubic element could have been easily achieved, the stage directions command to build a slanted structure. This optical illusion exposes the deceptive nature of the performance. The theatrical space is not designed to present a faithful rendition of what we know to be a cube but to build a three-dimensional playful element that suggests a cube. The opening stage direction gives the stage designer some leeway in the distortion of the angle, yet at some tipping point, the spectators may no longer acknowledge the structure as evocative of a recognizable geometrical figure.

In a way, this play on the familiarity/defamiliarizing effect of the cube may be reminiscent of the relationship theatre harbors with the real. Poised between surprise and recognition, theatre slightly bends our pre-conceived categories. Many seminal plays can be read as the combination of familiar aspects that strike a chord in our experience and elements of surprise, introducing a new angle, a slightly distorted outlook on the familiar, mundane world we

45 Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic*, 124.

46 Albee, *Box*, 263.

live in. The distortion of the cube allows *Box* to express this illusionary experience visually: we are tricked into experiencing “the feeling of a cube” even if the structure is not a cube. The aim is by no means to reduplicate a cube that preexists the stage structure (an actual and concrete element of reality) but rather to evoke “the feeling of a cube.”⁴⁷ The almost-cubic object present onstage conjures up our mental representation of a specific geometrical structure. Therefore, it appears that visually, the cubic structure reproduces one of the many purposes of theatre as an art form: the resort to cunning devices and illusion in order to enable the spectators to feel genuine emotions. This play on perspective also takes into account the focal point of the onlookers: it is very likely that the distorted angle may be more or less conspicuous depending on where one is seated. Insofar as the front side of the cube (the one facing the audience) should be bigger so that “we should see the other five sides clearly,”⁴⁸ the distortion of the sides is meant to play with the audience’s point of view. In that respect, the cubic structure can be seen as an anamorphic set-up (as in Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*) that relinquishes correctness and exactitude for the sake of “feeling” and questions the audience’s stance and positioning.

4 Conclusion: The Emotional Power of the Black Box

This focus on *feeling* is later developed throughout *Box*, with the carefully crafted references to emotions providing the piece with a distinctive lyrical quality. The voice goes through many emotional variations and alludes to the pain that may trigger art: “you cry from loss ... so precious. When art begins to hurt ... when art begins to hurt, it’s time to look around. Yes it is.”⁴⁹ As an audience, the prevailing impression is that this emotion emerges out of darkness, out of the dim atmosphere of our foggy minds, as if we couldn’t make out which emotional chord had been struck:

But it couldn’t have been fog, not the sea-fog. Not way back there. It was the memory of it, to be seen and proven later. And more! and more! they’re all moving! The memory of what we have not known. And so it is with the fog, which I had never seen, yet knew it. And the resolution of a chord; no difference.⁵⁰

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 265.

50 Ibid., 266.

Therefore, *Box-Mao-Box* is marked by a paradox: crafted with utmost almost scientific care, its efficacy in triggering emotion remains hard to approach without rational categories. Thus, performed in a box (the stage set), in a black box (the theatre), its operative process is very similar to that of a black box as defined by science theorist Bruno Latour in his seminal work *Science in Action*: "The word black box is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex. In its place they draw a little box about which they need to know nothing but its input and output."⁵¹ In a way, something similar takes place onstage in *Box-Mao-Box*: we marvel at Edward Albee's craft, and our artistic background may help us decipher some aspect of its complex esthetics of obscurity, yet we find ourselves trapped, experiencing an emotional response that fits into the carefully delineated cube conceived by the playwright. Through the input of complex and innovative theatrical devices (abstraction, geometry, darkness, distortion, illusion ...), the dramatist manages to wrench an emotional response out of the audience: we acknowledge the effect that the play has on us even though we do not fully understand it. To conclude this study of two features of the scenic design of box ("geometry" and "darkness"), I reiterate that Albee's controlled attention to stage design does not foreclose outbursts of pure emotion. Solomon recalls the emotional intensity of the rehearsals: at the end of the first reading, Patricia Kilgariff, who was performing the Voice, is said to have dissolved in tears at the unexpected emotional quality of the work. Similarly, Clive Barne's review, published on October 1, 1968 in the *New York Times* and entitled "Albee's Adventurous Plays," invites us to let go of our interpretative drive:

I enjoyed it. I don't say I understood it—actually I presumed, perhaps wrongly, that there wasn't very much to understand,—but I let the words lap over me, like creative foam over a more than usually receptive stone, heard some of them, let them run around in my mind, and this way or that way gathered an experience.⁵²

By foreclosing or at least suspending our interpretative drive, obscurity disrupts the meaning-making process of hermeneutics and opens up an intensely poetical space of enjoyment of a pure theatrical phenomenon that resists theorization. Beyond the geometrical imagery usually associated with control, let

51 Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8.

52 Barnes, "Box-Mao: Albee's Adventurous Plays," *New York Times*, October 1, 1968, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-box.html>, accessed July 24 2018.

us follow the advice that Alan Schneider left us in the form of a handwritten note to himself scribbled across the front page of his working copy of the script of *Box*. When in front of such a disquieting theatrical object, one should maybe pause and check our interpretative frenzy in order to focus on “what it is” as much as “what it means.”⁵³

53 The front page of Schneider's working copy of the script of *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* bears the following inscription, scribbled with a pencil under the title of the plays: “(what it is vs what it means).” Alan Schneider Papers Collection of the University of San Diego, consulted July, 2017.

“I Trap People”: An Interview with Edward Albee

Jackson R. Bryer

Abstract

In this previously unpublished 2003 interview, Edward Albee discusses such topics as the value of a university education in theatre, the role music plays in his playwriting, the value of reading plays, his most memorable theatregoing experiences, his writing process, why he directs productions of his plays and what techniques he uses in doing so, and the kind of audience he wants for his plays. He also offers his opinions on success and rejection, on dramaturgs, on the film version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and on color-blind casting.

On October 10, 2003, Edward Albee spent the day at the University of Maryland in College Park. During the afternoon he met with groups of undergraduate and graduate students, and in the evening he participated in a public interview at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center on the University of Maryland campus. The interview was conducted by Jackson R. Bryer, Professor of English at the University of Maryland. The transcription that follows, which has not previously appeared in print, has been slightly edited for publication. For significant assistance in preparing the transcription, I wish to thank Carolyn Bain.

JRB: Because we're here at the University of Maryland, where, earlier in the day, you met with students, I thought I'd start by asking some questions about what you think a student can learn about theatre and what they should learn about theatre in a university. How can a university education help students learn an appreciation for theatre—both for those preparing for a career in theatre and those just interested in reading plays and being in college productions?

EA: Since I got thrown out of college, I tell whatever students I have that as far as I'm concerned, once you've learned how to educate yourself, there's no point studying in college; but there are some professions in which, unfortunately, if you do not have a degree, you are not going to be treated properly. You're not going to get the kinds of jobs that you should want. A lot of technical jobs in the theatre demand that you have a college degree. Why? I don't know. It's a lot more difficult to learn how to do an art/craft properly than it is to get a degree for doing it, but it all depends. There's no general answer to this; it all depends upon what the student wants, how quickly the student can absorb what is absolutely essential for knowing the craft—how much more educated

you need to be to perform your function properly. With playwrights, people writing plays, I don't think there is any virtue whatsoever in studying playwriting. When people ask me who my professors in playwriting were, I start with Sophocles and I go right on up.

JRB: But earlier today we were bemoaning the fact that so many acting students these days leave the stage and go into film and television.

EA: Most of those who do are encouraged to do it by their teachers.

JRB: Isn't the biggest service we can do as educators to educate an audience rather than to educate performers?

EA: No, a teacher can do something else. He can educate a student so that the student is incapable of acting in movies or television! Some of the best actors I've ever worked with couldn't have film careers. Irene Worth, a great actress, was not good in films simply because her technique was a stage technique; she was magnificent on the stage, but she didn't work in the small framework which film and television are. There's a way of teaching people how to act on stage and a way of teaching people how to make a bunch of money in Hollywood.

JRB: And money is the reason for the exodus to Hollywood, isn't it, most of the time?

EA: It's probably a combination of money and fame they seem to want. I mean, nobody's against it, you know.

JRB: When you were talking with students today, you mentioned your early experiences going to the theatre; but I would be interested in whether you read many plays as a young man?

EA: Try to remember, since I started going to the theatre when I was five and six years old, I probably wasn't reading much Chekhov at that point. I dare say I was seeing theatre before I started reading it; but I always read beyond my years—and I got in terrible trouble. I was adopted into a wealthy family that had a big library downstairs with leather-bound books, and I had the dreadful habit of taking those books out of the library and taking them upstairs to read; and I would get severely criticized for doing that: "There's a book missing from the library." "I'm sorry." I was going through Turgenev's plays and through novels when I was about twelve—and I would be criticized because there would be a gap in the library because I had not brought the books back. Of course I was seeing plays before I was reading them. I don't know exactly when I learned how to read a play; probably it was when I started acting.

JRB: I've always been struck by how theatrical your plays are.

EA: A play has no value unless it can hold the stage.

JRB: Because you were brought up going to the theatre and being exposed to live theatre, did that make you more aware of what works on stage?

EA: Maybe to a certain extent, but I think that what probably influenced me was the fact that when I was about twelve, I discovered classical music. I discovered Bach and Beethoven and wanted to be a composer. I educated myself in classical music. The structure of classical music is very tightly related to the dramatic structure of plays, not thematically necessarily, but there are vast similarities between the structure of a string quartet and the structure of a play. I think I learned more about dramatic structure from Beethoven than I did from anybody.

JRB: Can you elaborate on that? What did you learn from musical structure?

EA: It's a little hard to talk about, but I find that there is a logic in sensible music with structure—tension, release from tension, key movement, away from the tonic up into distant keys and then returning back again. There's a kind of logic and order to a musical structure, and a play that works satisfactorily has this particular kind of order to it, no matter how unconventional it may be. It's very hard to talk about it, but it has something to do with the inevitability, the difference between the inevitable and the arbitrary. No truly successful piece of music is arbitrary; when you get to the final movement, it was inevitable that you were going to get there, no matter how far away we got. I wrote about that, as a matter of fact, in a play of mine called *Box*; there's a lot of talk in there about the relationship between classical music and dramatic structure. It's a short play; read it.

JRB: Can you talk about how you use music? You listen to music before you write, don't you?

EA: I think a good way to begin the day, to clarify the mind, is to listen to a couple of Bach fugues. I think that really clarifies the mind very nicely; but I would never write listening to music because those rhythms would get in the way of the rhythms of my characters.

JRB: Would you say that the structures of classical music have found their way into your plays?

EA: Not specifically, because these are aesthetic parallels, not exact duplications; but I think listening to as much music as I did helped me understand that a play is a heard experience even more than a seen experience—the same way a deaf person can watch a movie and get it and a blind person can go to a play and probably get the majority of it, but you can't send a blind person to a movie or a deaf person to a play.

JRB: You have said that you wish more people read plays.

EA: I wish more people read plays for a couple of reasons. Any production of a play, no matter how good it is or bad it is, is an opinion of the play. You get much closer to a playwright's intention by reading a playwright's words and stage directions; but every production is an opinion. What interests me

so much about drama criticism is that all drama criticism is an opinion of an opinion. No wonder those poor guys are in such trouble!

JRB: Can you recall what were some of your most memorable theatre-going experiences?

EA: My first experience of theatre of the absurd was when I was about eleven or twelve; and Olsen and Johnson had a wonderful show on Broadway called *Hellzapoppin*, in which the most extraordinary theatre of the absurd things were happening, usually to the audience. It was theatre of the absurd. It's hard to talk about it; it was a great and wonderful experience. You had some fake ushers who would intentionally take the audience to wrong seats and then make them climb over three rows to get to their proper seats. It was a two-act musical, and when you came into the theatre there was a man standing there with a small plant who kept saying, "Plant for Mr. Johnson! Plant for Mr. Johnson!" And you came out for the intermission and he was standing there with a taller plant, saying, "Plant for Mr. Johnson! Plant for Mr. Johnson!" Then you came out at the end of the show and in the lobby there was this huge tree and the same guy was still saying, "Plant for Mr. Johnson! Plant for Mr. Johnson!" When you're eleven or twelve, that sort of thing cheers you up a lot.

JRB: And didn't you have another memorable theatre experience with Ed Wynn?

EA: Yes. My adopted family was involved with the vaudeville circuit and they would send me in to Broadway to see Ed Wynn's musical revues. Ed Wynn always had a section in his program where the phone would ring and he would pretend to talk to someone, and when I went to a matinee, tiny little me sitting in a box stage left, my family would call up Ed Wynn and say that I was coming to the show. So I would be sitting there watching and all of a sudden the phone would ring and Ed Wynn would answer and say, "Who is this? Eddie Albee? Hello there." I would watch him pretending to be talking to me even though I was there and I wasn't talking to him. That was another pretty good experience with the theatre of the absurd. I liked that a lot.

JRB: That gets us to something else you feel about theatre, that seeing or reading a play is very much an individual experience.

EA: Well, no two people see the same play because no two people bring the same intelligence, the same willingness to participate. Everybody in the audience sees a different play.

JRB: And you seem to stir up, even to annoy, the audience.

EA: So long as people are having a vital response to what's going on and they're involved and interested, that's fine. Whether they're getting the author's intention or not depends on so many things—how good or bad the production is, how willing an audience member is to participate fully in the experience.

JRB: You've talked quite often about what kind of audience you want.

EA: I have very unreasonable demands. I want them to be sober. I want them to be not fed so full of food that they'll fall asleep. I think all plays should be done at eleven in the morning. That was the great virtue of Shakespeare's day; he did the plays in the daytime before everybody was drunk.

JRB: And you also want the audience to come with a lack of resistance, don't you?

EA: I do. I know I'm kidding myself, but every time I go to a play I try to pretend that it's the first play I've ever seen; so I don't bring any baggage with me of previous experiences. And if I go to, say, one of Craig Lucas's plays, I try to forget that I've ever seen a play by Craig Lucas before because I want the virgin experience of the play. I don't want to bring a lot of Craig with me.

JRB: That's very hard to get an audience to do these days, when we seem to want playwrights to write the same play again, especially if the original one was successful. But your new play is about what happens to Peter before *The Zoo Story*.

EA: It's a totally new play that has nothing to do with *The Zoo Story*, except that *The Zoo Story* follows right afterward. Peter is home with his wife before he goes to the park to sit there reading a book and be confronted by Jerry. What's interesting about it is that I wrote *The Zoo Story* forty-five years ago—amazing!—and I knew Peter still; I knew the guy, but I also discovered that I know more about him than I knew when I was writing *The Zoo Story*. I thought, when I wrote the play in which there were two characters, that I had done my job completely. Actually, I thought I had written sort of a character and a half, but Jerry was so interesting that I thought I could get away with not having written a full character in Peter, who was sort of a backboard. That always bugged me a little bit, so I was very happy when I got this commission so I could do the whole thing.

JRB: You were talking today with a student of mine who is directing a production of *The Zoo Story* about some of the ways you think it should be done.

EA: I was pointing out a lot of the mistakes that I've seen young directors and young actors make with the play. After all, in the play Jerry is thirty-eight years old, and in most productions that I see at colleges Jerry is twenty or twenty-one. The actor cannot have the experience of thirty-eight. There were a couple of other traps that this director was not falling into. He told me that Jerry is not psychotic; if anything he's too sane to survive in the world as it is. He's not self-indulgent, he's not talking to hear himself talk or to be pitied. He's a teacher, and the only way he can teach is ultimately by Peter denying him, denying him three times. By the way, there are some religious overtones or undertones in the play, the three denials. Jerry does not come on stage as a

would-be suicide; he's not looking for anyone to kill him. He does not know until the moment that Peter is standing there holding the knife; Jerry puts his arms wide in a kind of crucifixion, shrugs, says so be it, and runs on the knife. That's the first time he knew it was going to happen. Playing Jerry as someone trying to get killed or as a psychotic is wrong, and that's a danger that a lot of productions fall into, a mistake that a lot of directors make.

JRB: Speaking of directing, you've directed many of your own plays, as well as plays by others, especially Beckett. Why did you decide to direct?

EA: It goes back to right after I wrote *The Zoo Story*. I was getting a lot of productions and it's something that occurred to me, at least in theory, especially since the way I write a play is that I hear it and see it as a performed play, a play being performed in front of me while I'm writing it. But nobody can see or hear the play that I saw as clearly as I can, and so I thought, why don't I just start directing my own work? Of course, it never occurred to me that there was any craft involved in directing! So I directed this production of *The Zoo Story* deep in the foothills of Pennsylvania with a young black actor named Terry Carter playing Jerry. By the way, he disappeared into television in a futuristic series; I don't know what happened to him. It was probably the worst production of any play of mine I've ever seen, including two in west Texas. Then it occurred to me that there was some craft involved in directing, so I went and sat around with a lot of very good directors who were directing my work then and I learned an awful lot more about directing by doing that and ended up being a fairly good director.

JRB: What did you learn? What did you learn to do or not to do?

EA: I learned for example that playwrights think conceptually, but all that can be directed is practical reality. You cannot direct metaphor, you cannot direct symbolism; you can only direct what is happening to the characters while it is happening to them. Not all plays are naturalistic. That's what I learned. I had sort of sensed it, but I'd been trained to believe that some plays were highly stylized and some were naturalistic; and then I realized that there's no such thing as naturalism; no plays are naturalistic but all plays are naturalistic.

JRB: You've said that all plays are realistic, but you've also said that, in life, any person or event you observe is both a reality and a metaphor.

EA: But what do you do when you can't direct a metaphor? That can't be directed. You direct a three-dimensional, moment-to-moment reality of what is happening to the characters with each other or to themselves; that's what you direct.

JRB: Do you find that when you direct you often get questions from actors about why a character does something?

EA: I'm very Socratic, or Aristotelian, whichever it is. I ask questions. Why are you doing this? Why is that happening? I try not to give orders. I try to ask why you've come to this conclusion, why are you reading a book?

JRB: Do you know the answer?

EA: Sure, or I wouldn't ask the question! But I want them to end up figuring out what the proper answer is—not the answer I want to hear, but the answer they need to give to understand.

JRB: When you're directing one of your own plays, are you seeing it through two sets of eyes simultaneously, one as the playwright and the other as the director?

EA: When I'm directing my own work, it is a little more difficult because I have to split myself down the middle. I have to think about my play as a director would when I'm directing it, never losing sight of the fact that I think about it conceptually as an author. When I'm directing a play of mine, I have numerous conversations with myself. I the director have conversations with me the author, and sometimes we argue and I usually win. If I'm directing Beckett or somebody else, my responsibility is fidelity to that author's intentions; but when I'm directing my own work, my responsibility is still to the author's intentions. I try to keep them both separate. If you're directing your own work, you really have to become two people. You're the same person but two people.

JRB: To change the subject a bit, I don't think you get enough credit for the humor in your plays. Do you feel that they are funny?

EA: I find that audiences, bright audiences, are going to get all the humor that's in the play; they laugh a lot. Sometimes the laughter catches in their throat. With *The Goat*, for the first half-hour or twenty minutes of that play everybody was laughing their heads off, and all of a sudden it started catching in their throat and they realized it really wasn't very funny—and they stopped laughing, which was fine. I hate humorless plays, which is one of the reasons I prefer Chekhov to Ibsen. Chekhov had a sense of humor. Laughter in the dark, that's the most important thing.

JRB: Another characteristic of your plays is that you take what may seem at first like a far-fetched situation, and, by the end of the play, we accept it. But you've caught our attention by the basic situation. *The Goat*, of course, is a prime example.

EA: That's intentional. I trap people. I throw them off balance. It's called modulation in music, getting into a distant key. But I'm not going to talk about what I calculate and what's spontaneous. Every bit of calculation in my plays is totally spontaneous, and all the spontaneity is totally calculated.

JRB: To get back to Ibsen and Chekhov, I like the statements you've made about catharsis in theatre.

EA: Yes, Ibsen is the old well-made play concept where everything is tied up neatly, all has been explained, and the only thing you have to worry about when you leave the theatre is where you left your car. Ibsen and Strindberg were nineteenth-century playwrights; Chekhov may be the first twentieth-century playwright. You're left with the dilemma of the play when the play is over. It's not all tied up neatly for you. You take it with you. The only problem with that is that you can't find the car! Look what happens with eighteenth—and nineteenth-century music. Everything is tied up by the end—less in nineteenth-century music, but certainly in eighteenth-century music. It all resolves itself, and the emotion is contained within the piece; but in later music, it's not. The catharsis in music moves outside the body of the piece.

JRB: Do you think that the fact that there seems to be less resolution in theatre and in literature has something to do with certain aspects of modern times?

EA: Forms evolve, I think; it was probably inevitable that catharsis was going to move out of the body of the play, and it was Chekhov who figured out how to do it. It was probably inevitable, but there's always counter-movements. Practically nobody went to plays in ancient Greece without knowing everything that was going to happen before they went. There was no surprise, no catharsis.

JRB: You have a notion of theatre as not frivolous entertainment but rather as sometimes dangerous, frightening, or disturbing, especially when so much of our culture seems designed to make us feel that everything is all right.

EA: Because that's what people are happier paying for. Don't give into it. Write or paint or compose the kind of work you feel the need to do and make the assumption that some people will come along with you and some people won't. You don't go into the arts seriously if you want to be an employee. You should want to be an independent contractor; that's very different.

JRB: Has that been difficult?

EA: No, not for me. I'm too ornery to be an employee. I decided very young that I never wanted to have a job, never wanted to have an eight-hour-a-day job; so I have a twenty-four-hour-a-day job.

JRB: Somebody asked you today about success and failure.

EA: I said they were both dangerous because they were both misunderstood. I've had my share—let's not use those terms, success and failure, because they mean so many different things—of acceptance and rejection. I've had both of those for sure.

JRB: How have you dealt with rejection?

EA: I hope as well as I have with acceptance! I don't think about myself in the third person very much, so it's a very hard question to answer. There was

a wonderful cartoon by Peter Arno in *The New Yorker* around the time of the Second World War. A fighter plane had just crashed and there were some generals staring with great rage at a tiny little man with his frilled umbrella and his droopy hat who was clearly the designer of the airplane that had just crashed, and he was saying to himself as he walked away, "Oh, well, back to the old drawing board." I am no more discouraged by acceptance than I am by rejection.

JRB: Is that how you coped with the fallow years before you were "rediscovered" after *Three Tall Women*?

EA: I was having productions all over Europe and all over the United States but not in New York City—and if you don't have productions in New York City, you don't exist. I think to survive at all in the serious arts in the United States you have to have a fairly accurate view of your own value. It shouldn't be overblown, but you mustn't underestimate yourself. You should have a fairly accurate view of whether you are any good or not and not be discouraged if people aren't getting something that you know is pretty good. That's foolish. Or you can err on the side of thinking that it's better than it is, but that's probably a safer proposition than erring on the side of giving in because people don't like it and it's not as good as it is.

JRB: One of my students said something about you that I thought was very astute. He said that you don't let your characters off easy; you make them experience the difficult moments in life because that's the only way they know they're alive. Is that accurate?

EA: I'm trying to think whether I'm imposing these rules on my characters or if that is who they are and that's why they behave that way, which is closer to the truth.

JRB: You once said that we can either be asleep or awake, and if we're asleep none of the hard things happen to us because we weren't paying attention.

EA: Yes, that's right. The sad thing is that those people come to the conclusion that life is unfair—and then they die. Once someone accused Beckett of being a pessimist. That is absolutely so simple. If I were a pessimist, I wouldn't write. It's an act of communication.

JRB: What is your writing process?

EA: I don't write lots of drafts. I wait a long time before I put a play down on paper. I think about it for a very long time until I know my characters and I have a fairly good idea of the destination of the piece even though I don't know what the first three lines of dialogue are going to be; when I start writing it down, my characters do know. I get ideas, and I wait until they can't do anything else but be written down—and then I write it down. That's how I write a play. I write my plays basically to find out why I'm writing them. They're in my head. They are translating themselves. When they translate themselves into dramatic situations, I put them down on paper. I suspect the plays are basically

written in some form in my head before I write them down. I discover that I am with idea; somewhere along the line I have gotten intellectually knocked up. That's the best I can explain it. I don't really know where the ideas come from, I'm just grateful that they do; but it's my job to have ideas. I'm a playwright and I have ideas for plays because I'm a playwright. I don't want to get into too much conversation about this awful thing called the creative act, because any writer who talks about it sounds like a jabbering idiot and I don't want to do that too much.

JRB: If a play remains in your head for such a long time while you're developing it, how many can you deal with at any one time?

EA: Usually three. But I don't think about all three of them at the same time. That would be a little confusing. They say that musicians can only hear three lines, three instruments, playing simultaneously. They can pretend to hear the fourth but they can't really follow it. I can move from one phase to another; I can stop thinking about one play and start thinking about another one. But they are usually in different degrees of construction. One is clearer than another, which is clearer than yet another one. They're not three of them moving simultaneously toward the page.

JRB: Do you feel that the logistics of writing as a profession interfere with the purity of the craft?

EA: There should be nothing standing in your way except greed or cowardice to keep you from writing exactly what you should be writing the way you want to write it. If you are somebody who wants to write only to become very, very popular and make a lot of money, you will probably compromise to make sure you don't offend people and make them turn their backs on you. But if you have the pleasure, the wish to write to communicate something to people, you write it the way you want to and then you have to be willing to face the trouble that a lot of people are not going to want to participate in it—and that's their loss.

JRB: A number of your plays incorporate the use of direct address to the audience, don't they?

EA: About half of them. I think it's interesting. I used to think I did it to annoy Walter Kerr because he didn't like any play where he couldn't be a spy, so to speak; he hated any play where the actors or the characters were talking directly to him. He only liked plays where he could watch through the peephole; so maybe I was doing it to annoy Walter. I don't think so. It's interesting to do stuff like that and let the audience see things from a different perspective. Sometime I'm going to write a play where I invite members of the audience up on stage.

JRB: What do you think of dramaturgs?

EA: Some dramaturgs overuse their function and think that they are playwrights themselves—and they're not. It's a tricky matter, though. Some

dramaturgs are highly educated, highly useful people, and others are not. Everything should be in service of the play. Nobody works in the theatre unless the playwright wrote the play, and the more people who remember that the better off we'd be. Playwrights are not small cars with large wheels; the playwright is the reason that all the people are employed in the theatre.

JRB: What about the movie version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

EA: There were a couple of things that were interesting about that film. I wrote the play in living color; the movie was in black and white—very odd, but in those days you couldn't do a serious film in color. If you were doing a film in color it either had to be a musical or a light comedy. When they made the film, I went out to Hollywood to see a rough cut, which was before they put the music in, and the end was exactly what I wanted. It was tough; it was cold. Then they put this awful movie music in and the whole ending of the film changed; it became sort of soft and sentimental and all the toughness went right out of it just because they put the music in. I have to fight sometimes when stage directors ask what music I would like in my play. I say I didn't know I had any!

JRB: You were quite young when you wrote *Virginia Woolf*, and it was a play about middle-aged people. How did you know so much about them?

EA: A playwright is supposed to know that stuff. I used to be a very young playwright and almost all the characters I wrote were a lot older than I was, but that's my job—to be able to penetrate those mentalities and those psychologies. Now that I'm older, a lot of the characters are much younger than I am and I have to try to remember. It's my job as a playwright to be able to do that. I've never been a woman, but I write female characters. I've never been eighty-six years old, but I've written old people. It's your job as a writer to be able to do this stuff, and if you can't do it then you shouldn't be writing those characters.

JRB: What's been your experience with public funding of the arts?

EA: What public funding of the arts? Do you know that the average per capita funding of the arts in the United States is about thirty cents and in Germany now it's about four dollars per capita? We don't fund the arts particularly well in this country and there are certainly no-nothing members of Congress who are trying to eviscerate the National Endowment for the Arts. I don't know why so many people who are supposedly running our government feel like the arts are dangerous, but they may know something because the arts *are* dangerous—and that's why they want to close down help for the arts.

JRB: You once said, "Wherever you are, be there." What did you mean?

EA: I think I meant that wherever you are and whatever you're doing, participate fully, not partially, because nothing could be worse than coming to the end of your life knowing that you didn't participate in it, that you've wasted the good moments and the bad ones and all the rest of it. Wherever you are, be there fully.

JRB: What can you do as a playwright to be sure that your intentions are met in production?

EA: What you try to do is work with people who are not going to misinterpret your plays. We have approval of the director, the actors, and the designers who do our plays, and nobody can change a word of our text without permission. If we want to give in and say, "I'll just take the money and you do what you want," we can do that too; but if we want to be protected and be sure that only the very best people are doing the very best work as close to the author's intentions as possible, we can do that. It's basically indifference and laziness on our part if we don't protect our own work. I insist on getting the cast lists and everything on just about every production except for amateur ones. I do some research to find out whether the actors are right for the roles and whether I know the director's work and is this a director who will be sympathetic or somebody who's a show-off or something of that sort. I say no a lot because I have the right to do it. Sometimes with an amateur production there's nothing you can do about it, and sometimes too they're quite wonderful. One of the very best productions of Beckett's *Endgame* I ever saw was an amateur production with young people; they totally understood Beckett.

JRB: How do you feel about the current vogue of color-blind casting?

EA: I was talking a couple of years ago at Julliard where some of them were trying to put me on the spot on color-blind casting, and I made what I thought was a reasonable point. I think everybody should have a chance to play just about every role in the theatre, but the more naturalistic the play, the more difficult it is to suspend the audience's disbelief. The more stylized the play or the farther removed from the present the play is, the easier it is. They were leaning on me a little bit, so I turned to a very nice young black student who was asking me an awful lot of questions and I said, "Tell me something. Would you be OK if I directed a production of one of August Wilson's plays and I cast it with half white and half black actors?"

I go back a long time. The year and a half I was in college in Hartford, I went to see a production of *The Duchess of Malfi* with a famous Austrian actress who was whispering her lines. There were no microphones so nobody could hear anything she said and it was a bit of a mime performance. Her consort was played by a very fine black actor, and you're not going to believe this: In 1948, he had to do the role in white face. It was shocking, but that's one of the ways our country was functioning then. People ask me why we can't have *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with a multi-racial cast, and I say, "OK. Tell me which character will work?" You can't have any casting that is going to get in the way of the suspension of disbelief. It has to do with how naturalistic or stylized the play is.

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